

A PERSONAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN PRIVILEGE, BLESSING, AND LUCK AND  
WHY IT MATTERS TO GOD'S ENTIRE CREATION

A Professional Project  
presented to  
the Faculty of  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

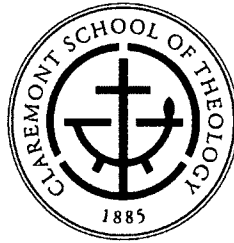
by  
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May 2014

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has been presented to and accepted by the  
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

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## ABSTRACT

A Personal Struggle Between Privilege, Blessing, and Luck

and Why It Matters to God's Entire Creation

by

Jonathan Bennett Hall

I would like to invite you on a journey with me. I am struggling with the label of blessing. I hear individuals saying that they are “blessed with multiple houses and new cars.” Meanwhile, I hear others saying that they have nowhere to sleep and no means to get somewhere. I wonder where God is in the midst of this struggle. I am writing these words as the prosperity gospel and its proponents label many privileges and financial prosperity as God's blessing upon their lives. The global church is moving from the Global North to the Global South. As it moves south, the global church is moving into poorer areas that still struggle after many years of colonization, industrialization, and globalization. The church is becoming comprised of more complexities than ever before, which makes this struggle pertinent for today.

I believe that spiritual formation in the midst of a world with an ever widening gap between poor and rich is vital. My effort in writing this journey is to spark awareness in the souls of those around me. My writing is for everyone, but those who follow Jesus Christ will find it particularly pointed at them.

More than on one occasion, I have been accused of overthinking things, including in relation to constructing my theology and helping others in the area of spiritual formation. I believe in the theological quadrilateral. We cannot solely rely on God

communicating to us through the Bible. God continues to speak through scripture, traditional, reason, and experience. I bring all of these to the table; I hope that you will do the same. Truly, all of them are gifts from God!

Some have asked me if I am hoping to start a revolution or reformation with the penning of my struggle. I am hoping for awareness in all peoples when they claim something as a blessing. This spiritual formation needs to happen in all religions. I can only speak from the one that I call home. All spiritual formations, at their best, should open the door for all to come home. It is needed now more than ever in the twenty-first century.

Participants in the study were members of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Ventura, California. An invitation was sent out to the entire congregation to participate. Materials used were a movie and a questionnaire. Participants also stayed and discussed the topic in a larger group.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words cannot express my immense gratitude to all of the individuals and communities who made this journey possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family. Annie Greig, my wife, who supported me throughout this entire process. My mother, Jill Hall, and my father, John Hall, who have always encouraged and believed in me even when I did not completely believe in myself and my life's journey. My sister, Melissa Turner, her husband, Zack Turner, and my nephews, Lucas and Adler, who always been there for me even when I did not deserve it. I am also grateful for my brothers-in-law, Noah and Isaac Greig, who allowed me to take over the house with notes and books as I "puzzle-pieced" this project together. I appreciate their grace when I wanted to over-analyze each little facet of life.

I cannot list all of the friends who need to be named. Words cannot express what it means to have friends who have traveled with you through the peaks and valleys of life. I am grateful to this adopted family when they entertained my questions!

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. It is continuing to be true with me as a young man. This project would not have been possible if it were not for the faithful disciples at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Ventura, CA. Sadly, many pastors are denied the opportunity to return to the academy. I hope that this project will serve as an example of a mutual blessing that can be experienced when congregations enable their pastors to continue to learn and embark on new endeavors. I thank Jon Berquist and the Disciples Seminary Foundation who initiated the possibility and helped make it financially possible. I am also thankful for the congregations and schools who helped formed me and encouraged me to "dig a little deeper."

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
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### Section A: Leaving Egypt

Chapter 1: How Did We Get Here?.....	5
Chapter 2: Where is the Church in All of this Mess?.....	13
Chapter 3: Once You Notice Slavery There is No Going Back.....	22
Chapter 4: Wrestling Between Privilege, Blessing, and Luck.....	29

### Section B: Wandering in the Desert

Chapter 5: Are We Really Having This Discussion?.....	39
Chapter 6: Can't I Just Be a Blessing?.....	57
Chapter 7: How Would Blessing Look?.....	65

### Section C: Entering into the Promised Land of God's Dream for Creation

Chapter 8: God's Dream is Spread Upon the Earth But We Cannot Yet See It.....	73
---	----

Appendix: Response From Famous Prosperity Gospel Televangelist's Prayer Department (Creflo Dollar).....	86
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Postscript: OK, So Now What?.....	91
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Bibliography.....	94
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For all of the individuals who never grow too old to ask another “why” when they are not  
satisfied with an answer...



## INTRODUCTION

A trip led by some of my professors at Eden Theological Seminary in January 2008 took me to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I had been to Costa Rica to travel and experience the beauty of nature and a new culture in 2006. I imagined that I would have a different experience than the prior trip. My professors warned me that we would not be “sightseeing” or “bringing God to these people in Central America” (since God is already present and therefore does not to be brought to anyone or any place).

Nicaragua is much different than Costa Rica. The history of colonization, political leaders, and other factors lead to a much better life in Costa Rica for most of its citizens. In 2008, Nicaragua was new to me. I knew that it would be poorer and dirtier. We learned about Augusto Nicolás Calderón Sandino. His story as a revolutionary leader for the poor in Nicaragua was attractive to me. I had studied liberation theology in seminary and was drawn to this type of theology and follower of Christ. Meanwhile, the United States military considered him a bandit.

In the capital of Nicaragua, Managua, I found myself looking at former jail cells for revolutionaries who sought for a better way of life for the poor in Nicaragua. As I looked out over Managua I saw an area of land next to Lake Managua. It was full of what I thought was debris and smoke. I thought that it was unfortunate that it was next to the lake. I saw people moving around in that area. I asked my professors if we could visit the location. Our tour guide hesitated when he labeled it as “the dump.”

“The dump” was the land fill in Managua. The group from my school decided to not go into the dump. The sight of a mostly Caucasian group from the United States sightseeing in the dump seemed inappropriate. We drove by the dump to meet with

someone who previously lived in the dump and now served as a community organizer and guide. We stopped at a business that paid for various metals. Then, things started to make sense to me. The metal shop was there because people went to the dump to find metals and other objects to sell at various shops in the area. It got worse; people not only searched through trash bags in the dump, but they also lived there. As we continued on our drive, I was able to see individuals who lived in the dump. My heart melted. I could only say to myself: "I am blessed." I could easily go to the dump, their home, and leave; they could not easily walk into my home.

I had trouble the rest of the trip. I wondered why I was "blessed" to not live in the dump. I wondered what type of God would bless me and not someone else. I began down a journey that I want to begin with you. Am I blessed to not live in the dump? Does God allow some to live in the dump while others live in mansions? The next step gets scary for me as a middle class, white, heterosexual male. Does blessing have anything to do with why I am not in the dump while another one of God's children lives there? Is it better to say "I am lucky?"

Luck seems to be rolling the dice and getting that four that you need for a Yahtzee. There seems to be more than luck that placed me in a van with a tour guide who spoke my language. It was more than luck that enabled me to go on a plane across thousands of miles. There seems to be a system that allows me to be in this position. I wonder where God could be in all of this "luck." Is it better to say: "I am privileged?"

Privilege seems to be more appropriate. Privilege allowed me to have the ability to go to the schools that I attended, pay for the trip, to not need a travel visa (due to my United States passport), and to be put in the situation where I could choose to go to

someone's home and leave when I wanted. I feel alone wondering where God is in this overwhelming privilege that I experience. It seems as if others around me do not see their privilege and it scares me. Is this something that God predestined me to experience? Is this type of situation something that God would desire? Does God cause these situations to occur so that I can know how "blessed" I am? Much is at stake here, including the character of God, which shapes our interactions with one another and our understanding of how God acts in the world.

Unfortunately, one does not have to go to the dump in Managua to realize how the game of life seems to make it easier for some to yell "Yahtzee" while others are left on the wrong end of monopoly. As I look back on my life, I hear voices that tell me that I deserve what I have. I see many people, including myself who were blind, deaf, and unable to understand why my class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and so much more allow me to go into other people's homes, but prevent them from entering mine. The following journey is a struggle of what it means to want to be a blessing in a world where I experience vast amounts of privilege.

#### PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

It seems as if my struggle about the difference between privilege, blessing, and luck is full of more questions than answers. The very nature of God and the direction of God's actions in the world as at stake with this question. In the past, I was not aware of how social systems had constructed the reality that I knew. I did not see that my constructed theology supported my privilege as I made God in my own image. I do not

think that I am alone in this struggle. My goal is to help others become aware of the importance of this problem for all of God's creation.

### IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Privilege, power, and control of constructing theology tend to go together. It leads to systematic support of the ways things are as being ordained by God. The Global Church is moving away from its historic geographic base of the Global North. The Church is blossoming throughout the Global South in areas that have been decimated by the powers of colonization, industrialization, and globalization. This is an area of the world where one can clearly see a struggle between liberation theology, the belief that God has a preferential option for the poor, and the prosperity gospel, the belief that God blesses individuals with wealth.

As the world continues to get smaller and we are able to hear and interact with one another as we construct our theologies, it is vital that we understand how our constructed realities affect our understandings of the nature of God and how God interacts in the world. It is the role of the Church to help individuals be aware of social systems that affect all of creation. Spiritual formation is one of the keys for allowing us to protect God's creation, including our neighbors and ourselves.

## SECTION A: LEAVING EGYPT

### CHAPTER ONE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I love college football beyond what most people would consider “normal.” I tend yell scream and cheer for my team throughout the game. I have worked myself to a point where I became out of breathe because my heart was racing. I called my sister after Auburn won the national championship. We cried together because we were so happy. As I did this, church members saw me dress up in my Auburn uniform. Some members watched the game with me because they wanted to simply watch me as I saw the game. I am very passionate about my Auburn Tigers.

I love the God who made me in God’s own divine image. I love the Creator of the Universe who artfully continues to form and reform all individuals and molecules that make all that I can understand as a limited finite human being. I love Jesus Christ and the story that he continues to tell about how my life can be more fully experienced by participating in a new “way.” I love the Holy Spirit that relentlessly guides us as we continue to try to make sense of all that has meaning. I am very passionate about my faith and how it continues to guide me through the peaks and valleys of life.

The championship game would likely not have included Auburn if they did not beat Clemson that year. It was an incredible game. I was tired after watching the game. It went back and forth. It even went into overtime. In overtime, Auburn kicked a field goal. Clemson could try to score a touchdown to win the game. If not, they could extend the game by kicking a field goal. If they failed to score any points, Auburn would win the game. Clemson kicked a field goal to tie the game. Then, the referee threw a flag, so Clemson had to re-kick the field goal from five yards further. This time, they missed it. I

was delighted; it is great to win. Winners tend to write the history. Dangerously, they tend to craft the theology too. Auburn's coach at the time was asked to explain how it all happened. He called it a "God thing." Apparently, my God cares about my Auburn Tigers. What could be better, right? We were the ones who prayed before and after the game, so it is right for God to bless *us* instead of *them*, right?

If it is true that God blesses Auburn to victory, I am an atheist. Why would I want to believe in a god that cares more about a football game (played with the skin of an unclean animal, by the way) than those who are starving to death in the world? Why is that god compelled to help Auburn win, but be deaf to the pleas of parents for their children to have food in their bellies?

*Does the God that I love bless my beloved football team to victory when there seems to be much more important needs in the world?*

We seem to be addicted to believing that God is going to bless us against our foes. Furthermore, we seem to be enslaved to this mentality. This is dangerous for us, others, God's creation, and, even, God. I believe that we need to escape this enslavement and go into the Promised Land of crafting theologies that are good news for everyone, not just "us." I fear that we have made it far as a species, but our theologies have not kept us with us. Theologies are supposed to be liberative and good news instead of enslaving and hurtful. It caused Moses to move; perhaps, it will cause us to move too.

WAR

Perhaps, this is where it all started. We pray for God to be on our side (perhaps, we should be praying to be on God's side of peace, hope, and love). The victors write the history; the victors craft the theology. The language of a war god is quite common in the ancient world. Some cultures believed that there was a cosmic battle guiding the human battle.

As a Christian, I must be mindful that we have failed to follow the Prince of Peace. I wonder, "Have we done more harm than good?" I want to defend my faith, but then I look at the sobering events of the Crusades, the colonists destroying the cultures of and subsequently settling in the Global South, and the Nazi murderous acts against the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Some have said to me to have the faith of a child and not overthink our history. It seems to be quite childish to think that others can simply forget our history.

The early Christians living in the first three hundred years after Jesus were fairly unanimous in opposing war. As Christians, we hardly agree on anything! These followers of Jesus, however, did not see war as normal, but, in fact, an outrage and a sacrilege. Could you imagine the conversation between those early Christians and modern day Christians who call for war? Later, war became "normal." Beyond that, it became sanctioned through ideas such as "just war theory."<sup>2</sup> How did this view of war and, subsequently, God blessing one side over another come to being? Why do we look "up" to be proven correct when we could look across into the eyes of those around us to find the best option?

We have heard the phrases: "Truth shall set us free" and "We need to follow the

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, eds., *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: The Center for Applied Christian Ethics, 2003), 80-1.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Maquire, *The Horrors We Bless* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1-2.

Way, Truth, and the Life.” Sadly, one of the first casualties to war is truth. It is the only way to spark the fire for war and see it as necessary. Said alternatively, we need to dumb down what we are doing so that we do not have to face the fact that we are aiming to kill someone who is made in God’s divine image.<sup>3</sup> Again, is having a childlike faith really the Way that Jesus invites us to participate with him and others?

Even now in this globalized world, we can see the violence used for religious purposes. It is no longer about converting “those people over there” or imposing our doctrine over certain areas of the world. Instead, it not about one victory, but the perpetual thought of war. In other words, violence is not about control, but about divine revelation. We can see examples of this in terms of terrorism and warlords in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Is it true that God’s will is communicated through the destructive force of violence?

For me, the enslavement seems to have started from the desire of being proven right and victorious over our foes. I am starting to feel as if I am an Ancient Egyptian as I am enslaved to something that is not God. God approving war seems as if God wants to kill and destroy a part of God’s own self or creation. We should not forget that all of us are created in God’s image and that God called creation “good.”<sup>5</sup> God seems to desire blessing fullness of life for all of creation rather than support its destruction. Jesus came to bless and give life, life abundantly.<sup>6</sup>

## BLESSINGS

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<sup>3</sup> Maquire, *The Horrors We Bless*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Nikos Kotzias, “Violence, Religion and Globalization,” in *Violence and Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Conversation*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis, (Geneva: WCC Publications: Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> John 10:10 NRSV



Blessing has a history prior to Christianity and outside of it. It began with ancient religions. In fact, it was once a magical rite.<sup>7</sup> I believe that prayer is very important to one's spirituality. Asking for blessing and acting as a blessing is also vital. As we pray, it can be seen as one seeking to partner with God for the wholeness of everyone and everything.<sup>8</sup> For me, to participate in God's work in the world, prayer is about being an agent of God's good news for the world. So, if it is a "God thing," then I am left wondering how I can do more in the world than simply cheer as an oblong ball is kicked through metal posts as my celebration causes sadness to the other team and their fans.

Defenders of magic and religion have wrestled for many centuries. For some, they were the same thing. For others, such as the Mayans, the priests knew the dates of the eclipses so they could act with god-like powers. For others, it had to be separate because witchcraft has nothing to do with Christianity. In medieval Christianity, blessings were seen as an active process of negotiating with God. In other words, one venerated God, made a promise, and asked for something in return.<sup>9</sup> Honestly, I have tried it in the past. I felt shallow as I negotiated with God. "I will give You this if You give me that." If it failed, I am left to be blamed because I did not "believe enough."

The German word *segnen* means "to bless." It is derived from the Latin word, *signare* meaning "to make the sign of the cross" or "to cross oneself."<sup>10</sup> The cross, for me, can mean different things for different people. Clearly, I hope, it cannot mean to go out onto a football field and make the sign of a cross on oneself. Does God really care about the outcome of a football game? Does the sign of the cross need to be put on the

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<sup>7</sup> Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 119.

<sup>8</sup> James K. Wagner, *Blessed to Be a Blessing* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1980), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Derek A. Rivard, *Blessing the World* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2009), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, *Blessed to Be a Blessing*, 40.

forehead of those dying in bed or struggling through their life? Is not the latter worth passing onto our children when the former belongs in the history books of primitive peoples many centuries ago?

Some folks associate blessing with healing, so I may need to consider the two. I am a progressive Christian, so the notion of “healing” tends to bring images of fraudulent televangelists and people convulsing in the aisles. I have escaped that image. I seek to have it as a part of the life of my local congregation, but most of my parishioners tend to view it as I once did. This viewpoint of healing along with a negative viewpoint of blessing makes it difficult to reclaim these words in the life of the church. I do not want to give up this word in the vocabulary of my faith.

Healing is often associated with the laying on of hands. Some scholars view it as one of the fundamental teachings of Jesus. Early Christians used it in their ministry towards others.<sup>11</sup> For me, Christ is always inviting us to give things away (i.e. possessions, life, blessings, etc.).<sup>12</sup> Sadly, I rarely see this part of faith. People seem to be fighting for blessing or wanting to keep it just as kids play the game “king of the hill.” Blessing seems to be about giving the sign of the cross to others rather than keeping it to yourself. Perhaps, we can model the way in which Christ gave it all away. God’s revelation seems to be associated with hills or mountains.<sup>13</sup> We do not need to fight over blessings from God. Once we realize this reality, I believe that healing can occur in our world. It takes one person at a time. Jesus embodied this life and invites us to a similar life.

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<sup>11</sup> Wagner, *Blessed to Be a Blessing*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 17:33 NRSV

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 20 and Matthew 5-7 NRSV

## LOSING OUR WAY

Since the fourth century C.E., Christianity and its theology has been dominated by male voices from the dominant Global North. This one-sided construction of theology fails to represent the Pentecost moment.<sup>14</sup> I rejoice that since the mid-twentieth century, Christianity, as a whole, is moving from the Global North to the Global South. It is happening geographically and theologically.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Christianity is not always speaking out of a male, privileged point of view.

I believe that we, as Christians, have become addicted to power and have sought to keep it. How did this come about from a poor Jewish peasant (with no power) in first century Israel (which also had no power)? Perhaps, as our theological voices become less privileged, we will begin to sound more like the Jesus who I read about in the Bible. It is good to have hope, right?

*Does the God that I love bless my beloved football team to victory when there seems to be much more important needs in the world?*

I am beginning to wonder what victory looks like for God. I view victory as a triumphant act against one's foes. Perhaps, God's victory looks similar to how Jesus invited a Samaritan woman to share the same well with him instead of fighting over it.<sup>16</sup> When one shares the basic necessities of life with another, it humanizes the other. We

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 2:1-13 NRSV

<sup>15</sup> Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 25-6.

<sup>16</sup> John 4:1-26 NRSV

can fight over basic necessities, but it would likely lead to a mutually assured destruction of all.

It may be nice to think that there is a force beyond ourselves that causes us to win. I am coming to learn that if that force exists, it is not God. Jesus invites us to bless others in the most vulnerable ways - on the forehead with oil that has been used for medicinal purposes. It is a way of being mutually vulnerable; it is not about causing wounds and destruction, but healing one another. That is our invitation from Jesus.

Jesus shows us that God can bless individuals even as they fight over the blessing.<sup>17</sup> As we seek for God to bless one or the other, God blesses both. God seems to prefer “both/and” as we tend to see them as “either/or.” As I return to the “God thing,” I may have figured out where to start. God’s thing or mode of operation seems to be inviting us to bless those whom we have previously cursed and to share life with them. I can get behind that, coach!

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 15:11-32 NRSV

## CHAPTER TWO: WHERE IS THE CHURCH IN ALL OF THIS MESS?

When I was young, I played a variety of sports, including baseball. One day, I was in the front yard practicing my bunting (instead of swinging the bat, I would simply nudge the ball a few feet and then run to first base). As I was practicing this conservative way of batting, I ended up hitting what would likely have been a double in the gap of right field. I was fortunate that my mother, who happened to be in our dining room, was not standing in front of the window. I ended up hitting the baseball through the front window. I knew that I was in trouble; it was a double paned window. It was not going to be cheap to replace.

My parents helped me set up a way to repay them for the window through a long list of chores spread out over a few months. A week later, we went to a family friend's house for their Kentucky Derby party. It is always a fun and exciting time. The adults would bet on the horse after studying the odds and reading up on the horses. Meanwhile, my grandmother innocently gave me three bucks to be able to participate. I was one of the few kids, so she wanted all of us to be able to join in on the screaming and excitement that seems to last about two minutes while folks at the event are wearing funny hats.

I had no idea which horse to choose. I ended up choosing the horse with the coolest name - Thunder Gulch. This horse had some of the worst odds (25-1) in the derby. The race began. Everyone was screaming for these beautiful creatures as they galloped along the way chasing a fake animal on the rail. The race ended. Many folks seemed furious with the results. I had no idea who won the race, but it was fun to watch. Suddenly, my grandmother came over to me and told me that my horse won the Kentucky Derby. I

was, of course, confident that this horse would win because it had the coolest name. Amazingly, my prize was just enough to pay for the window that I broke. I began to celebrate because I knew that it meant that I did not have to do all of those chores! My mother used it as a teaching moment about money and not relying on betting to make progress in life. I was, in her words, “lucky, but this is not normal.”

Was it luck? Was God blessing me because God wanted me to not have to do those chores (of course, I would, instead, be spending the time playing video games or something else to change the world)? Was I privileged to have a grandmother who felt compelled to allow me to participate? Where is the church in this murky theological conundrum?

## JESUS

I always seek to start with Jesus when understanding the world. The Gospels report that Jesus blessed the little children.<sup>18</sup> Jesus also blesses food, his disciples, and others during his ministry. The question is whether this imparting of blessing from Jesus allows the recipient to win while causing other deserving people (or horses) to lose. Is that the meaning of being blessed? The stories about Jesus seem to not focus on the blessing part of it. Instead, the texts tend to focus on being sent out after the blessing.<sup>19</sup> In other words, blessing is not the end of the road. It is the beginning. Jesus blessed

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<sup>18</sup> Mark 10:13-16 NRSV

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 10:1-4 NRSV

individuals and items so that they could, then, bless others.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus did not create blessing out of nothing. It followed the line of the tradition of the blessing bestowed by a father and then, in later times, by a rabbi in the Jewish tradition.<sup>21</sup> In fact, when a father went on a long journey, he would often depart with a blessing.<sup>22</sup> He was passing on the blessing that he had received in the service of worship. This type of blessing is common across many traditions, including one that I studied while in Morocco for a semester in college. Muslims will often greet one another with the blessing *salem-aleikum* "peace be upon you." This beautiful blessing also occurs at tables in everyday life. All of this seems to point to the mission of Jesus - to bless his followers and send them out to be blessings.<sup>23</sup> Blessings from Jesus seem to keep leading me from myself and my prosperity to blessing my neighbors.

I am beginning to think that being blessed by Jesus is not about winning anything. It is about giving it away, even to those who are different than me. Jesus invites us to bless our enemies - those who seem to trouble us the most.<sup>24</sup> The ascension of Jesus according to Luke seems to shadow the high priest bestowal of blessing found in first century Judaism.<sup>25</sup> Thus, followers of Jesus, who are called to be Christ's body in the world, are called to bestow blessing as Jesus did on others. There seems to be a cyclical relationship with the world - receive blessing and then give it away almost immediately.

## PAUL AND LATER CHRISTIAN THINKERS

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<sup>20</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 89-90.

<sup>22</sup> Tobit 5:16 NRSV

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 10:1-4 NRSV

<sup>24</sup> Myron C. Madden, *The Power to Bless* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 152.

<sup>25</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 87.

As a Christian, I can also turn to Paul for one example of someone who seeks to follow Jesus even if neither one of us met Jesus before his resurrection. Scholars tell us that the word *blessing* does not occur often in the New Testament. The stem *eulog-* is found 68 times, of which 40 signify praise. We are left with only 28 other examples of blessing in the New Testament. Some of them have to do with the quoting the Old Testament in regards to the blessing of the patriarchs.<sup>26</sup>

It may be helpful to continue this biblical study to see how the concept of blessing changed for the followers of Jesus who likely knew about the previous understanding of blessing. Scholars find three types of context for our study. First, the Old Testament concept of blessing is basically altered to mean the saving acts of God in Christ.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it now has Christological meaning for the reader. Second, the blessing of Christ is understood as the proclamation of the gospel brings about growth, prosperity, and strengthening of the community.<sup>28</sup> Third, followers of Jesus are invited to bless those who curse them.<sup>29</sup> The Christianization of the word breaks from the blessing and cursing language found in the Old Testament. Said alternatively, Christians can lead a life where blessing others is no longer juxtaposed with cursing our enemies.<sup>30</sup>

I found myself thirsting to experience more of the third option. The first option makes sense from a psychological point of view as one tends to understand reality in terms of what they already know. The second viewpoint makes me hesitant because of the thought of the prosperity gospel. I can appreciate growth and strengthening, but the

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<sup>26</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Galatians 3:8-9, Acts 3:25-26, Ephesians 1:3 NRSV

<sup>28</sup> Romans 15:29 NRSV

<sup>29</sup> Luke 6:28, Romans 12:14, 1 Corinthians 4:12, 1 Peter 3:9 NRSV

<sup>30</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 98-9.



baggage of the prosperity gospel is something that I have to deal with in my life. The beatitudes found from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, seem to flip the script on the familiar world.<sup>31</sup> Jesus knew that his world was full of privilege and domination that prevented the large majority from living an abundant life. Sadly, the world has not changed much in that regard. The beatitudes flip the script on what we know. Jesus says that those who are normally on the wrong end of privilege (i.e. poor, meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness) are the ones who are blessed. This is one of many stories where Jesus flips the world upside down. Sadly, most cannot experience these words of Jesus because of the systems of domination and oppression.

Luckily, there was not one understanding of blessing in the Bible, so we can be enriched by all of them. The third understanding of blessing makes sense in an industrial military complex world in which I live. We tend to communicate through domination and power. Jesus, who did not have access to this type of communication, invites us to communicate through blessing others.

I can appreciate how those early Christians tried to make sense of power and blessing when they explained their relationship with Jesus. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection makes them rethink everything. Perhaps, that is the point of the exercise. Some say that Jesus came to earth in order for God to better understand us. For me, I better understand God because of Jesus. In other words, I am repenting as I look at blessing, privilege, and luck from new perspectives. They were wrestling with how to make sense of it all with their multiple understandings of blessings. This reality gives me comfort for my struggle.

As a follower of Jesus from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tradition, I

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 5:3-12 NRSV

tend to go to communion with my theology. It is a time in our worship services when we remember the brokenness of our world. It is vital that anyone who hungers for a closer relationship with God and their neighbor be able to participate. Finally, it is a part of the service where ordained clergy are not necessary because we believe God's spirit dwells equally in all people. All of these attributes of the highlight of our service - communion - communicate blessing. Sadly, we live in a world where people are told that they cannot do some things – that they should just walk off pain, you are weak if you feel lonely, and its wrought with inequality. Communion brings us back to the One who empowers us, hears our cries, comforts us, and seeks justice and equality in the world..

I cannot help but think of 1 Corinthians 10:15. It describes the cup of blessing which we bless. It asks the rhetorical question: are we not participating in the blood of Christ? It describes the bread and reminds us that we are breaking it. It also asks rhetorically, are we not participating in the body of Christ? I cannot help but think of participating when I consider the definition of blessing. We think about Jesus doing the blessing as he breaks the bread and pours the wine. On a deep and mystical level, we are invited to participate in the actions through which people are nourished. Perhaps, that is an understanding of blessing that I can work with moving forward.

As we nourish individuals and communities in our world, it helps to remember that the power of blessing maintains the ties between those who share blessings with one another.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it connects us to one another across all of the lines that tend to divide our world. Just as Jesus and Paul did not draw a line between socio-economic statuses, ethnicities, and other distinctions, the notion of blessing transcends these divides. It was surely the case for the early church with its baptismal creed that in Christ, there is no

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<sup>32</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 88.

longer racism, classism, and sexism.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Jesus is pushing all of us to greater commonality. Sadly, I doubt that his actions got the results that he sought. Jesus' aim seems to be that nobody can claim blessing for themselves based on their own rights. Thus, blessings from God are not a zero sum gain. We can receive and give blessings away, but we are still blessed!

In biblical times, olive oil was universally considered a medicinal tool. It was often used to accompany a blessing - 143 times in the Old Testament and 20 occurrences in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, the best medicine for the ailments and wounds of the world begins with blessing one another. I see it as dismantling hate and healing our world. Perhaps, again, I am invited to participate in this healing.

*Does God want to bless me in order for me to win at the expense of others?*

We tend to think of blessings in terms of being privileged. That viewpoint leads us to some dangerous conclusions. I believe that there are enough of God's blessings to go around, so we do not have to fight over them. In fact, we are supposed to share them which is, in and of itself, a blessing. Jesus sent out his disciples to every country in the world with that mindset. Wow, we messed this invitation!

Blessing others can take a variety of forms. It is not about the political debate of distributing wealth. It is much more than that idea. Though, the Bible does give us some examples of such an economy of God.<sup>35</sup> As a United States citizen, I struggle with that notion, but other faithful Christians see it as a new social order.

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<sup>33</sup> Galatians 3:27-8 NRSV

<sup>34</sup> Wagner, *Blessed to Be a Blessing*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Acts 4:32-7 NRSV

Early Christians had difficulty understanding what it meant to be a blessing in the world. They wondered how they fit into God's blessing of Abraham; they realized that it was not about ethnicity and bloodline, but about an invitation to a new way of life.<sup>36</sup> It comes down to blessing by nourishing our world with an endless supply of olive oil. As I studied in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, I lived in a small Tamazite village. The family that took me in as one of their own invited me to press my own olive oil one morning. I was invited to walk a donkey in a circle while the donkey enabled the olive oil press to work. I will never forget seeing the olive oil pouring out into a container. There was an abundant amount. We stopped to enjoy the olive oil with the freshly baked bread that my "adopted mother" had just made. There was an abundance for all to share and be blessed! I was breaking bread and sharing God's blessing with these wonderful people. It was not about our different bloodlines; it was about participating in a new way of living - the Way. It had everything to do with learning from one another and realizing how one's actions and beliefs could affect the other. Later, we danced the native *Ahouash* dance that I was studying. Surely, we can join hands and dance in this world instead of reaching for ways to hurt one another.

God is not about blessing others in the form of money. It does not make sense biblically, rationally, or by any grading scale. If it was true, God would be about privilege and domination - the antithesis of the Gospel.

In arguably Jesus' most important teaching (the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus invites us to not curse the world, but persevere in the hope of mutual blessing.<sup>37</sup> I would assume that is an invitation to act as God does in this world. I may be lost in the

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<sup>36</sup> Galatians 3:29; Philippians 3:3 NRSV

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 5:11 NRSV

wilderness trying to escape my enslavement to notion of privilege, but I know that it is a blessing to know that God is for all of humanity and creation, not against some and for others. I can get excited, wear a funny hat as I cheer for a horse, and dance for unending blessing that unites all of creation!

### CHAPTER THREE: ONCE YOU NOTICE SLAVERY THERE IS NO GOING BACK

I cannot help, but see the constant enslavement to making our own god who “blesses” us, but fails to hear the cries of the hungry children. I have shared my struggle with many since it began. Recently, an elder at my church texted me when he noticed a scary use of the term “blessed.”

LeBron James and the Miami Heat made a miraculous comeback in game six of the 2013 NBA Finals. They ended up winning game seven to win the championship. Their backs were against the wall, but they fought back. It was amazing and inspiring for many of the people who watched it.

During the subsequent celebration, a television announcer asked LeBron James about winning the championship. He said, “I am blessed.” My church elder could not help but contact me when he heard LeBron James saying those words. It is hard to accept that phrase in relation to sports or privilege once you really think about it. If God did bless LeBron, was God watching the game while not watching over the single mother who died in front of her children of a heart attack because she had to work multiple jobs to put food on the table? You cannot go back once you open your mind to thinking about the struggle!

Can I simply walk back into naiveté instead of struggling through the desert?

OLD TESTAMENT

I was shocked to hear that the Bible seems to paint a picture where there is no notice of blessing and God's actions accompanying it.<sup>38</sup> I wonder if it is some sort of magic that LeBron James, other victorious individuals, and championship teams seem to have compared to the rest of us. That idea really messes with my understanding of God, thankfully. Blessing was not fully absorbed into the cultic institution in the Old Testament, but remained separate.<sup>39</sup> I can definitely appreciate that idea! The notion of blessing cannot be controlled by an institution. I can feel the quivers of some of my Christian brothers and sisters who also tend to condone magic. Yet, some scholars seem to believe that being blessed had its origins with magic.<sup>40</sup>

## TORAH

Blessing can be experienced in a myriad of ways. In the beginning, it meant the power of fertility, which has remained ever since it was orally shared in a religious community. We can see the understanding of blessing as fertility in Genesis 1:22, 28. In this example, blessing means to have many descendants.<sup>41</sup> I wonder what that means for men and women who are unable to have children or who never have children. Does that mean that they are not blessed?

Genesis 12-50 seems to come to mind when someone wants to understand blessing. It is Abraham's call to be a blessing in the world. Yet, many Christian scholars leave out this important part of understanding blessing. It seems as if those scholars

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<sup>38</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 18.

assume that blessing is subsumed under the notion of salvation.<sup>42</sup> I believe that God blessed the world before Jesus walked the earth. Again, I am feeling lost.

Abraham is offered the gift of fertility in Genesis 12. God seems to be the source of this blessing. Some may call it “from the Father to a father.” This notion has its origin with fathers having the specific authority of calling “down” blessings. We see it with Isaac blessing Jacob.<sup>43</sup> We see it with kings upon their subjects.<sup>44</sup> I suppose this is what “King (LeBron) James” meant when he was blessed.

The act of blessing, in fact, was understood by early Israelites as the act of imparting power to another. Said differently, you were giving part of one’s soul from God to another person.<sup>45</sup> I can appreciate the notion of passing part of one’s soul to another person. It is a beautiful idea! I do not have to struggle anymore!

Wait, there are other texts. I sometimes want to erase the parts of the Bible just as I want to erase the words from LeBron James’ lips. Blessing seems to also mean the power to defeat one’s enemies.<sup>46</sup> The Balaam oracles promise success in warfare.<sup>47</sup> Sadly, this is starting to sound familiar. God does not seem to just promise success in warfare to everyone equally. Rather, it seems to be a power given especially to Judah and Joseph.<sup>48</sup> From the aforementioned texts that make me want to scream, I can try to save the last one. In Genesis 47:7-10, Joseph presents his father to Pharaoh and Jacob passes the blessing on to the king. Here, the poor nomadic herdsman is able to bless powerful Pharaoh. It is not simply about the powerful bestowing their powers to the

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<sup>42</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 27 NRSV

<sup>44</sup> Rivard, *Blessing the World*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Rivard, *Blessing the World*, 26-7.

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 24:60; 27:29 NRSV

<sup>47</sup> Numbers 24:17-8 NRSV

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 33:7 and Genesis 49:22-6 NRSV



lessers. Instead, in this example, it seems as if unequals can bless one another.

Furthermore, it can go outside the traditional family bloodline!

God seems to be in the blessing business. I can appreciate it. It is particularly evident in Genesis and Deuteronomy. The notion seems to go from extending to all of creation in Genesis 1-11. In Genesis 12-50, it seems to stay mostly in the family. In Deuteronomy, it seems to be about the land of Israel that God has promised to (some of) God's people.<sup>49</sup> It seems to go from extending everywhere to being about a certain group of people in a particular land. What about everyone else? Has the ability to be blessed been hijacked? The priests seem to take over the control of bestowing blessing.<sup>50</sup> I am sure that power does not corrupt, right?

## PROPHETS

I love the prophets. They tend to speak up in the midst of God being hijacked by fundamentalists. Isaiah seems to be saying that it is not staying within the family.<sup>51</sup> In fact, he pleads for those around him to do good, seek justice, correct oppression (enslavement), defend the fatherless, and plead for the widow. I think that it is time for all of us to be prophetic and stand up against enslavement. It is not about keeping the power among those who are closest to you. It is about an abundance that can be shared indefinitely!

Isaiah had the audacity to not curse the oppressors of his day. I imagine that most of us would want God to go after them with fire and lightning. Yet, Isaiah envisions, I

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<sup>49</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 29-30.

<sup>50</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 35-7.

<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 1:17 NRSV

would add blesses, the future time when even his enemies will be blessed by God.<sup>52</sup> I suppose that Isaiah thought that he would be close to God too. Thus, we seem to be called to be close to God and our enemies.

## JOB

Yes, I am going here. Job casts a picture where the godless and wicked are blessed, while the pious ones have to suffer. The theology found in this book seems to connect obedience with blessing.<sup>53</sup> This is an old notion that does not seem to deal with reality. I struggle with the notion that God imparting blessing is solely based on how obedient we are to God. As I tell my parishioners, this is a Santa Claus notion of God. God is always watching you to see if you have been a good little girl or boy. If you are good, then you will get presents! I wonder if we can grow up. I wonder if we want to continue these lies. Surely not, right?

The author of Job seems to be going at this age old assumption about God not being Santa Claus. God is described as being on the side of those who are unblessed as Job is described.<sup>54</sup> I need to unpack this notion. The author of Job seems to help me move past the notion of God as Santa Claus by allowing me to play with the three friends of Job who defend this notion of blessing. Thus, God is on the side of all, even those who do not seem to be privileged!

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<sup>52</sup> Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 64.

<sup>53</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 63.

## THE IDEA OF BLESSING CHANGES THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE

There is not a consistent understanding of blessing, if anything for that matter, in the Bible. It seems to start out as some sort of magic, even if we hate to admit it. The Deuteronomic theologizing of the notion of blessing makes it conditional. Thus, it eliminated the idea of it being magic; it became conditional upon obedience. In Numbers 6, the priestly tradition defines blessing in connection with the cultic Temple worship. In other words, blessing has a history of magic, being conditional, and solely being a part of the priestly acts in Jerusalem.<sup>55</sup> All of these notions fly in the face of Genesis 1 where God blesses all of creation, including all of humanity.<sup>56</sup> Why do we seem to desire control over this power of blessing?

## WE ALL WANT TO BE BLESSED

The culmination of Temple worship in Ancient Israel were the priestly words of blessing. This was not unique in the Ancient Near East. We can see Temple worship being the source and climax of Temple worship in Canaan, Egypt, and in Mesopotamia.<sup>57</sup> Even today, we find temples or erect temples so that we can be find privilege. We can see this with the way that sport's teams design their stadiums to be big, intimidating, and loud.

It seems to be the case that all of us are blessed. There is plenty to go around. We do not have to create a temple with stratification of classes, genders, etc. for us to

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<sup>55</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 57-9.

<sup>56</sup> Genesis 1:22, 28 NRSV

<sup>57</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 35-6.

know who is more blessed.

Can I simply walk back into naiveté instead of struggling through the desert?

No, I do not think it is possible. We may wander around in the desert trying to figure it out as the Israelites did, but we cannot go back to Egypt where we can be naive about social systems and blessings. I imagine that many folks give up on any notion of God in the desert. Yet, this is where God seems to be speaking to us from the mountain top and giving us stone tablets in order for us to not get lost on our journey together.<sup>58</sup>

I can see how we have been fighting over blessing since before we have called down blessings during a fight. Blessing is about sharing a part of one's soul with another person, not success in battle (or a tough basketball game, LeBron). There are no power dynamics with blessing. It is too good to be spoiled by power.

It does not matter whether we deserve it or not, God is in the blessing business for all of creation. All of us can have it. There is no need to argue over it as a children argue over whether a parent loves one child over his or her sibling. I feel as if we need to grow up. When we do, I can, perhaps, return to my naiveté.

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<sup>58</sup> Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 NRSV

## CHAPTER FOUR: WRESTLING BETWEEN PRIVILEGE, BLESSING, AND LUCK

As I stated earlier, I grew up in Alabama. I had an entire neighborhood of older folks who took me in as family. One lady in particular was quite special to me. She would stand up for me and sneak me a five dollar bill on occasion. She was an “adopted grandmother.” She understood me even though I always seemed to be awkwardly struggling to figure myself out.

One day, she took it upon herself to inform me that I should not be ashamed of anything that I have. I think that there must have been some sort of issue that propelled her to defend our privilege. In her words, “We got everything that we deserved. All that we have is ours. We do not owe anything to anyone.” It was the almost the end of the twentieth century, so I guess that it had something to do with affirmative action.

I wonder what made her think that she had to sit me down and tell me to not be ashamed of who I am and what I have. She must have thought that I was going to run into situations where people told me that I was privileged. I would be in situations where I would be asked to considered letting go of my privilege.

Should I be ashamed of who I am and what I have? Do I owe anything to anyone?

IT IS JUST NATURAL

Talking about privilege is not easy. I suppose that is why it is difficult for those in power to acknowledge that they have access to something that others do not. We live in a segregated society, especially those of us who are white. I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood. My adopted grandmother was always threatening to call immigration services to take those “illegals back to where they came from.” The same segregation with race happens regularly with sexual orientation. Most of us who are heterosexual tend to socialize with other heterosexuals. Therefore, the lives that we lead shape the worldview that we see.<sup>59</sup>

When we are young the world is quite small. The world revolves around us. As Paul says, when I was a child, I thought like a child.<sup>60</sup> I remember asking my mother why other do not just speak regular words (English) instead of making up other sounds for things such as milk and bread. The characteristics and attributes of those who are privileged are seen as the norm.<sup>61</sup> I wonder how many people do not grow out of that worldview. I wonder how many of those in power still think that way. If so, what are the ramifications for our world and our understanding of God.

It scares me when individuals want to go “back to the better days.” Even my religious tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seeks to go back to the first century church. We have learned that it was a mess, even then! Furthermore, it would mean the subjugation of women. Yet, we hear this quest to go back to a better time. I wonder if it is better to look forward to crafting a world in which we can all live and say that we long for the future, so we act today.

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<sup>59</sup> Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11 NRSV

<sup>61</sup> Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, 14.

Power and privilege tend to be seen as normal. Things are the way that they are in the world. Because power and privilege exists does not signify that I, a person of privilege, do not do a good job or that I do not deserve credit for it. I think that this is a fear for those of us who have access to privilege. It means that I am given something that other people are denied due to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other things.<sup>62</sup>

I suppose that it is, in fact, a privilege to wrestle with one's privilege. Not everyone has to wrestle with his or her privilege. It seems fitting that I am wrestling with my privilege when historically privilege has been defended by the state or by one's understanding of God. Just as Jacob did, I wrestle with God and where God is in the midst of a world of overwhelming privilege towards a few.<sup>63</sup>

## SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED

In patriarchal societies, power is culturally gendered in that which is generally associated with men. Thus, power looks "natural" on a man, but it is unusual, unbecoming, and even problematic on a woman. This tends to lead to scrutiny for women who are seeking to live out their God-given equality.<sup>64</sup> There are numerous examples of this in society.

It is sad that patriarchy tends to be defined as normal, natural, and God ordained. It seems that not only do those in power construct society, but they also construct the

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<sup>62</sup> Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 24.

<sup>63</sup> Genesis 32:22-32 NRSV

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 97.

theology is as well. Where is God in the midst of all of this construction? Is the writing of history that much different than that of constructing theology? I am beginning to think that they are not much different.

I believe that class, race, and gender systems are not normal, natural, and God ordained. For me, it defies God's character if it is so. We are all made equally in God's own image, right? Class, race, and gender systems are not the same as hair, eye color, or blood type. Instead, class, race, and gender distinctions are artificial constructions that mutually condition one another.<sup>65</sup> I suppose that this is why I seemed to have my little green army men and G.I. Joes destroy my sister's dolls and barbies. Social construction happens at an early age. Again, the same seems to be true for theology – for better or worse. Perhaps, this is why my adopted grandmother wanted to talk to me about not being ashamed. Those social constructions only have as much power as we assign them. She wanted to “protect” me, I suppose.

## PRIVILEGE AS A SYSTEM

An analysis of group membership reveals that privilege does not come by luck. There is more to it – whether we see it or not. I do not have to work for my privilege. Routine privilege is primarily due to membership in my class, race, or gender group that enjoys unshared power. In other words, contrary to what most people have been taught and experience knowingly or unknowingly each day, privilege is not distributed by luck

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<sup>65</sup> Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, 3.



or is God ordained. Instead, privilege comes as a result of a group having the power to increase the social burden upon another.<sup>66</sup>

It is not my fault! The existence of privilege is a legacy that we all inherited. I may go as far as to call it an original sin passed on from generation to generation. Even if it is not my fault, I am called to acknowledge it and seek to lessen or prevent it from passing on to the next generation.<sup>67</sup> As long as I participate in social systems, I cannot choose to be involved in the consequences they produce.<sup>68</sup> I am here in this particular time and place. The issue that I am wrestling with is *how* I will be involved. Will I be a part of the problem or a solution? It is about responsibility. As someone who regularly speaks in front of a group of people wanting to hear how God is active in the world, I believe that I am responsible for the construction of theology. Am I promoting the same theological framework that supported slavery or am I promoted liberation?

## LUCK

Much smarter people than me have wrestled with probability. Galileo was an expert on the game of dice. In fact, he even advised an Italian nobleman who regularly gambled that it would be wiser for him to bet on ten coming up on the dice more than nine. Galileo, oddly enough while spending his time be an astronomer and a physicist, to

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<sup>66</sup> Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 95.

calculate that ten would win 51.92% of the time compared with 48.08% for nine.<sup>69</sup>

I entered into the world with a set of givens, inevitable and unchangeable conditions over which I had no control yet affect me on a daily basis. I did not choose where I was born. I can simply respond to the fact that I was born in Alabama. Due to my birth in Alabama, I would experience much different things than a child born in Hong Kong.<sup>70</sup> I can only respond to this reality. I write all of this to simply state that we can only respond to the things over which we have little or no control.

### WHERE IS GOD IN THIS STRUGGLE?

Power seems to be at odds with my understanding of God. At least, in terms of it being used to define economic interests, cultural values, and patterns of social behavior that are seen as the norm. This type of use of power benefits those who are privileged and destroys the world.<sup>71</sup> I cannot see God supporting such a nasty part of the human experience. For me, nobody is inherently inferior to me. Yes, the Bible has been used to support such notions. Sadly, the next line in this thinking leads us to think that others are subhuman and their lives are insignificant. The next step is being able to do whatever you want to another individual because God created them less than me.

The biblical writers thought much differently than you and me. They thought that women were subhuman and that the earth was flat. If someone thought such things

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<sup>69</sup> Wayne E. Oates, *Luck: A Secular Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 57.

<sup>70</sup> Oates, *Luck: A Secular Faith*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, 15.

today, they would be seen as ridiculous. Yet, it is there in the text. Similarly, the belief that suffering is the punishment for sin can be found in the Bible. It can be seen as being inflicted by God who punishes us for sin.<sup>72</sup> This belief is still alive and well today. It is not only hurtful, but also dangerous. In terms of privilege, God is “blessing” some with multiple houses and punishing others with starvation and poverty because of sin. Is that the case for the vast majority of this world that lives in poverty? Are they all sinful? Do they all deserve what is coming to them because of their sin or their parents’ sin? We hear glimpses of this belief after natural disasters. For example, Pat Robertson said that Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti were due to such sins. Were there not good and honorable people in those locations? Perhaps, some of them were even Christian too!

### IS GOD ACTIVE WITHIN SUCH PRIVILEGE?

Privilege is a right granted as an advance or favor.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that white privilege reinforces the existing status quo and overlaps and interacts with other systems of privilege to create a web of so-called norms within our society. It affects how we view gender, sexual orientation, economic wealth, physical ability, and, yes, religion.<sup>74</sup>

As I consider oppressive systems and God, I cannot help but think of Zacchaeus

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<sup>72</sup> Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 76.

<sup>73</sup> Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, xi.

and the sycamore tree.<sup>75</sup> Jesus comes goes to Jericho and Zacchaeus, the despised Roman tax collector who ripped people off, climbs up in a sycamore tree to see Jesus. Zacchaeus is recognized by Jesus. Jesus goes to eat at Zacchaeus's home.

Zacchaeus misused his power. Jesus finds a way to bless Zacchaeus and the majority of folks who despise this tax collector. Zacchaeus is associated with the oppressive Roman power. Can he experience good news?

Zacchaeus had a house and could feed Jesus. By some accounts, he was “blessed” to have this ability. I see the blessing as occurring when Jesus opens Zacchaeus’s eyes to the oppressive system. Zacchaeus seeks to right his wrongs by more than repaying his debt to others. For me, God seems to deal with oppressive systems on a daily basis - whether we are the ones in the tree or those on the streets. Did Zacchaeus owe anyone anything? His response to Jesus seems to make the point.

Should I be ashamed of who I am and what I have?

Do I owe anything to anyone?

I think that Zacchaeus owes the people in the streets the awareness that he is privileged. Because of his privilege, he has the opportunity to change a world that does not have enough trees for everyone to climb. The lives that we lead shape the worldview that we see. If I listened to my neighbor and adopted her worldview, I would view the

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<sup>75</sup> Luke 19:1-10 NRSV

world differently. If Jesus did not go to Jericho, Zacchaeus would have likely kept his worldview. If we stay in our cities and our neighborhoods, where, sadly, people tend to look, worship, and vote as we do then we are in trouble. If we continue to do spiritual formation in seclusion to those who look, worship, and vote different than us, we are going to end up destroying the world.

I believe that too much is at stake when we think that we do not owe anyone anything when history and, common sense, in my opinion, would seem too contrary. What if I joined Zacchaeus, at Jesus' invitation, to stand up to the oppressive systems in this world? What if all of us did? Is that not God's dream for all of us? As a privileged person, it would be going against my economic interests, but I would be impoverished if the world continues to turn a blind eye to privilege. Christianity is not the only religion dealing with the problem of designating blessing, privilege, and luck. It can be found in many, if not all religions, including non-Abrahamic religions such as Buddhism. The school of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism that invites its followers to activate their prosperity. I have to wonder if prosperity and privilege are the reason why we look for a higher power? If so, we live in a scary and archaic world that is destined for mutual destruction.

In this world seemingly bent on destruction, norms are defined by those in power. Thus, power looks natural on a man, but it look unusual, unbecoming, and even problematic on a woman. It is about social construction. Furthermore, it is about theological constructions that give meaning to billions of people on a daily basis. Perhaps, I owe it to the world to construct a theology that does not seek the destruction of the God-given beautiful diversity found on this planet.

I suppose that my neighbor was trying to protect me from the world that I was bound to experience. I do not know if I should be ashamed by this defense by a woman whom I loved dearly. However, my privilege comes as a result of having the power to increase the social burden upon others. I cannot compartmentalize my adopted grandmother and my experience in this world.

I am indebted to my neighbor, but I cannot pass on this “original” sin to subsequent generations. I cannot see God wanting such evil found in systems of oppression and domination to continue. I suppose that I owe it to the future of the world to climb up in a tree and get a glimpse of reality. Jesus may invite himself over for dinner. In the end, I am not ashamed of who I am, but I am ashamed of the privilege that I am afforded because it is stolen from others on daily basis. I suppose that I owe it to my offspring and my “adopted offspring” to realize how enslaved I have been to power and privilege.

## SECTION B: WANDERING IN THE DESERT

### CHAPTER FIVE: ARE WE REALLY HAVING THIS DISCUSSION?

My car had to go in for maintenance in the spring of 2013. As most people do, the shuttle driver, an African American man, of the maintenance shop wondered what someone studies at a seminary. I explained to him my struggle of blessing, privilege, and luck. He just replied, “well, I have never thought about it. God just blesses some more than others, I guess. I go to church, but for some reason, I cannot get ahead in this world.”

As we spoke, we drove through the awe inspiring community of Claremont, California that is known as the “city of trees and Ph.D.s.” The homes are worth more than someone in my shoes can imagine ever being able to pay within a lifetime. I asked what he thought about the homes in Claremont. He answered: “God has definitely blessed them.” I asked what he thought about the systems of privilege that enabled some to live in this community while others could only drive through it. He said, “I have never looked at it that way. No offense, but you seem to be over-analyzing this a bit too much. Some people are blessed and others are not.”

I asked him about Donald Trump and his riches. Again, “well, he is blessed.” I asked if eating out of a golden spoon and having his family’s wealth had anything to do with current “blessing.” This gentleman paused, “well, now I can see what you are saying. He was born with wealth, which made it easier for him to get richer.”

I said, “that is the point of why I am studying. I think that people view Donald Trump as blessed instead of privileged. Does God bless Donald Trump with numerous houses while millions do not have a house?” My new friend smiled and said, “I look forward to hearing about what you learn.”

Do we have to have this conversation?

### AM I THE ONLY ONE IN THE DESERT?

Recently, I have brought up this struggle with all types of people. Some are interested while others are upset that I am over-analyzing things. I realize that some folks will not want to travel with me on this journey. They want to stay in Egypt with their enslavement to privilege as blessing because it is safe and comfortable. Perhaps, this journey is for white, straight, and middle or upper class men. We have been the ones to enslave ourselves and others to this privilege. I suppose that we may need to join the Israelites who cried in Psalm 134 by the rivers of Babylon. They wept and cried because they struggled to find God in a foreign place. I imagine that many folks will struggle to find God if we take away their notion of privilege as blessing. In some profound way, I will be taking away their god and putting them in a foreign place. If that is the case, I say “amen!”

I see Jesus doing many of the aforementioned actions in the gospels. Jesus was



radical about wealth and poverty because he lived in such a time and place with vast disparity between peoples. For Jesus, great wealth, oppression, and exploitation could be found hand in hand.<sup>76</sup> Yet, we, in our effort to honor Jesus, give the title “vicar of Christ” to the pope as someone with great power. We are blind to the fact that it could and, probably, should be given to an individual who is hungry, sick, imprisoned, or a stranger.<sup>77</sup>

### HOW LONG HAVE WE BEEN ENSLAVED?

The irony of this question lies in the fact that every great civilization was built by slaves of one form or another. Each great civilization has a religion or set of cultish practices that guided them. As a person who lives in the Global North, I tend to date things back to the Greeks. The Greeks, actually, did not have extensive leisure time for philosophizing and voting until they forced slaves to do the physical labor.<sup>78</sup> In other words, I cannot go back to an idealized origin of my country and some of the ideals that guide us without seeing systems of oppression.

I certainly cannot go to the European powers during colonization to find a time free of oppression. This was the time, of course, when European powers paraded around the world with great power where a few Europeans could wipe out thousands of native populations because of their superior strength in military. Meanwhile, the church joined

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<sup>76</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012), 66.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 25:35-40 NRSV

<sup>78</sup> Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

the party while failing to embody the one who stood up to oppression. We have, I fear, been enslaved for a long time. I would venture to say that it has been so long that we do not even realize our enslavement!

The church was deceptively smart during this time. They de-racialized Jesus. Anyone who has access to a Bible can see that Jesus was an Afro-Asiatic Jew.<sup>79</sup> Yet, we are surrounded with an Anglo looking Jesus. This does not compute. The radical story of Jesus was altered to the point of no return. Jesus struggled with systems of oppression, yet we are given a meek and mild messiah who did not want to change the status quo or with an image of a colonial Jesus who sided with the powerful and privileged classes. In the end, a white Jesus gave his stamp of approval on colonization and white racism.<sup>80</sup> I am becoming upset at all of this madness!

#### NOW, I FEEL ALONE IN THE DESERT

I firmly believe that change happens when we see ourselves in the other. George Orwell said that we cannot help but see ourselves when an enemy soldier stops to smell a spring or drinks coffee. Suddenly, you do not feel like shooting him.<sup>81</sup> Seeing one's self in the other changes it all. As we are in the desert, we need to see others and thus see ourselves and how our social and theological constructions are blinding us.

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<sup>79</sup> Boesak and DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, 50.

<sup>80</sup> Boesak and DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 36.

We are not only enslaved, but we are addicted to privilege as blessing. I cannot help but wonder about how the Roman Empire affected our understanding of power. Even after Rome was sacked, many Christians wanted to rebuild the earthly city of Rome in hopes of increasing its political power and to extend its reach in the Mediterranean world. It was said that God wanted the walls thicker, high, and safer. In short, loving Rome was the same as loving God's city. Thus, enforcing Christ's kingdom by might and law was the right thing to do.<sup>82</sup> Augustine had proposed that Christians had forgotten where their citizenship truly lay. Rome and the power that it represented was too alluring. All too familiar, Christians had confused its fortunes with God's blessing. Saint Augustine knew that the two cities, Rome and the City of God, could not have common laws of religion. He encouraged the heavenly city to dissent and become obnoxious to those who thought differently.<sup>83</sup>

I suppose that I am saying that we should give up a god that we created in order to support our cause in exchange for the God who supports the rights of all. As I look through church history, it seems as if we have chosen Jesus Caesar instead of Jesus, the Christ, from Galilee. We have preferred power and empire instead of humility and seeking justice. For some strange reason, it hurts to think this way. I may be wandering in the desert, but, oddly, idolatry has its appealing aspects.

#### A RESPONSE TO THIS IDOLATRY

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<sup>82</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 27.

<sup>83</sup> Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, 24.

I love Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine chapel. I actually have a replica of one in my kitchen. I have learned that there is a third character in the famous painting of God rushing towards Adam. I was blind to it, just as I have been blind in the past. Behind God's arm is a woman. It may be Eve, but I do not think that it is her.

Michelangelo had intimate knowledge of anatomy. He knew how a brain was constructed. Some have claimed that what God is offering the intellect in the famous painting. We seem to always be trying to project things unto God. Furthermore, we conceptualize God in ways that support our narcissistic wishes of God. The message of Michelangelo is that God is offering us Sophia, the woman, behind God. This knowledge, "sophia," that drives our intellect is a gift from God, but it is also quite dangerous as aforementioned.<sup>84</sup> Yet, the painting seems to be a reminder that God is offering us intellect for our well-being, not to dominate and construct a theology to support our domination.

The writers of the Bible lived thousands of years ago with primitive understandings of God. It should not be thrown out because of this reality. Instead, we should use our intellect to realize that our beloved texts have primitive ideas of God. If we fail to do so, our reptilian brain will cause us to view our neighbors and their faiths as threats. So, we, in fact, are the biggest threats to our faiths and our neighbors. Emerging science of psychoneuroimmunology tells us that our feelings, thoughts, and bodies are constantly interacting with one another. It is dangerous to assign religious connotations

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<sup>84</sup> James B. Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997) 45-7.

to these whims.<sup>85</sup>

I suppose that the above statements could make me a heretic in many circles. It is a risk that I am willing to take. If I fail to take this risk, the world may be at risk. I think that the same goes for all of us who call this planet home.

### JOINING THE JOURNEY INTO THE WILDERNESS

I find it difficult to read most statements about God acting in the world. Perhaps, I have a weak stomach for it or I over-analyze such things. I appreciate President Lincoln's struggle with faith and nationhood for both his side and the other. Lincoln wrote, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other....The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes....With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness to the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds ...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."<sup>86</sup>

It difficult to put words down in the time of war that honor one's self, enemy, and the God that created both of them. Abraham Lincoln seems to have done one of the best jobs that I have ever read. I am sure that both side asked for God's blessing. I imagine that both sides viewed theirs as the Christian cause.

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<sup>85</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, 52-69.

<sup>86</sup> Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, 6.

## CASE STUDY

I have been discussing my struggle with a variety of individuals and groups over the past six years (ever since I visited Nicaragua). The follow comes from my discussions with the members of my congregation - First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Ventura, California. We began by watching the movie entitled *The Help*. It is about an author who is writing during the 1960s in Mississippi. She tries to write a book about the African-American maids' point of view of the white families who employed them. I chose this movie because it helped us begin a conversation about privilege and how it is supported through social systems and, sometimes, even laws. It also had elements that included the role of the church in society.

Participants in the study were asked to answer a series of questions about the movie and the topics that it brought up for them. I introduced the topic of my study. They were encouraged to be aware of the privilege in the movie and how the church dealt with it. Participants were given the questions before the movie. I asked the following questions.

1. Abilene was asked about being a maid, she said that she grew up on a plantation. She added that her grandmother was a slave. She had always dreamed of doing something else. How do you think that her family's past affected her dreams? What if God had called her to be a minister or teacher?

2. What do you think of the white citizen's council and its efforts? What would you want the church to do if the white citizen's council wanted to use our property?
3. What is the role of the church in the situation of "-isms"? (racism, classism, sexism, etc.)? Do you feel responsible to act in such situations?
4. When is it ok to go against the law? What should we, as followers of Jesus, do in such situations? Do we have any responsibilities?
5. What do you think about the daughter who dropped out of school to raise the white child?
6. What is your reaction to the statement: "God doesn't give charity to those who are well and able"? What is God's role in the world that is full of social systems such as racism?
7. What was your reaction to Abilene saying "Nobody asked what it was like to be me"? How can we better know what others go through in order for us to help them? Should we help them?
8. How does the Kingdom of God compare to the culture in this movie?
9. What other comments can you make concerning privilege and how it shapes one's world view and dreams of doing something more in their life?
10. Where did you see God in this film?

We also had a conversation about the movie and how it relates to blessing, privilege, and luck. The first observation that came to me was that there were a variety of answers. I do not believe that the variety of answers come from some individuals being smarter than others. I think that the variety of answers is due to the fact that some have

struggled with social systems within their theological framework while others have not connected it to their faith. It was evident to me that sociology has not influenced many peoples' theologies. It seems as if people have compartmentalized their faith from the day-to-day reality of inequality. Is it that the church should solely care about salvation of souls in the afterlife instead of the earthly salvation that many of us seek in the present? This is not a new struggle. For example, in the United States, we can see this with Walter Rauschenbusch's writings.<sup>87</sup>

I see four distinct areas of discussion about the topic during this case study. We discussed the image of communion, theology and the Bible, social responsibility, and privilege.

## COMMUNION

As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we tend to almost always go to the communion table with our theology. It is the central piece of our theology and worship every time we gather. Our first meeting house, Cane Ridge, is located in Paris, Kentucky. We have sought to preserve the meeting house by enclosing it in a golden limestone superstructure. It is quite impressive to consider our efforts to protect it. Yet, I cannot help but consider how it had a loft for slaves to attend the services. White and blacks were separated during worship. As much as we try to explain it away along with the fact our founders had slaves, we must be aware of the inequality present in a place that we deem as holy. One participant noted that one of the final

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<sup>87</sup> He was a key leader in the social gospel movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His works include *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, *Christianizing the Social Order*, and *The Social Principles of Jesus*.



scenes from the movie painted the model for the communion table where the people making the food are equal to those who are receiving it. It is contrary to the parts of the movie where different ethnicities had separate eating places, bathrooms, and other normal aspects of life. The central part of our identity as Disciples of Christ has not always been a place of equality. The brokenness experienced around the communion table models the brokenness of the world in terms of social systems and “isms.”

Participants struggled with the reality of inequality. The early followers of Jesus would agree. Paul quoted the early baptismal creed that in Christ there is no longer racism, classism, and sexism for all are blessed.<sup>88</sup> Today, we could add other “isms” such as homophobia. Divisions seems contrary to the Christian understanding of humanity and how God interacts and blesses all of creation.

## THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

Participants felt called to have empathy for the social inequality in the movie. They felt as if the Bible would be against such equality, yet we know that it has been used to support such inequality. One of the participants said that it was one of the reasons why many people struggle with the idea of God. This participant said that people are wrapped up in today’s norms that are contrary to God that it makes them atheist.

In some deep and profound way, the main actress in the movie represented Jesus. She learned people’s realities and their pain through stories. She viewed them as people instead of animals. In the end, she acted as how the participants understand Jesus.

The same actor also wrote a book about the help. In that way, she wrote a book

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<sup>88</sup> Galatians 3:27-29 NRSV, restated

that liberated individuals from the inequalities of their day. The Bible should do the same for us today.<sup>89</sup> Any scripture should be for the liberation for and betterment of life for all of creation for it to be considered good news.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

This area was the biggest area of discussion. It was clear as one participant said: “inaction is action.” If we are not acting against something then we are supporting its existence. One participant stated that the role of the church is to “bring awareness to the way all ‘isms’ that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus and hurt all in the community. Regardless of one’s religion, we should all question and bring attention to all ‘isms.’” In other words, our responsibility as followers of the one who stood up against inequality is to call attention to inequalities that others may not see.

Another participant declared that the first action is bringing “awareness about the laws (that support inequality in Mississippi).” They went on to state that we should remember the powerful act of non-violent civil action. A different participant believed that we should follow laws, except when they go against scripture. They ended with the reality that we may be punished as Christ was for his disobedience to the law. I see a connection between Christ’s actions and our calling to follow in Christ’s footsteps. Clearly, an important piece seems to be the importance of awareness.

There was an innocent character in the movie who was not affected by the bigotry of racism and the hatred spread by some of the other characters. Some of the participants

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<sup>89</sup> I gave thanks to Liberation Theology and its effect on my life. I realize that many individuals of privilege would call it Christianized Marxism. I am thankful for authors such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Óscar Romero for waking me up to the reality towards which I used to be blind.

noted that it related to how we, as humans, are born good and that the social constructions and attitudes towards them come later through societal norms. One participant noted that some of the characters were trying to raise money for children in Africa, but we unaware of the inequality that they supported in their society. The characters believed that they were expressing God's Spirit by donating to children in Africa. This participant questioned if they were since they were unaware of the pain that they were causing.

One participant noted that the characters who went along with their lack of privilege even in the face of inequality were "bringing glory to God." I cannot help but place this quote next to others quotes as I try to discern how spiritual formation can be helpful. First, "God gives charity to all of us. God knows all humans need love and doesn't distinguish based on social status or race. We as people separate ourselves into groups 'us' and 'them'. God's role to share love with us so we can go forward and share that love without regard to race, class, and 'isms.'" Second, "In the Kingdom of God there is diversity and different races because all are part of God's world. But all have the resources and support to live their life in the way they wish, not how other's believe they should live. In movie, the way people lived was determined by others." Third, "The lives of the white people were trivial. Within the South in the 1960s, racism was written into the law." These are different understanding of how to respond to such inequalities. I see questions revolving about bringing glory to God by continuing to live one's life versus standing up to it. I also wonder about our reality compared to God's dream for us. I question how access to power affects one's ability to seek change.

One participant sought to help me in my struggle. This participant stated that "Luck is when opportunity meets preparation. Privilege is more special, favor than

others, but not necessarily, earned. Blessing is receiving what you have not earned.”

Other participants said that life was a combination of all three. Another participant believed that it was all a matter of how we designated things in our lives. It became evident to the group and others in subsequent conversations that this is a muddy situation. One issue seemed to be whether blessing or privilege is earned. As Protestant Christians affected by Martin Luther, many of us have struggled with earning salvation or blessing. In the end, we receive benefits in life - some earned and some not. Many participants struggled with how to designate them.

## PRIVILEGE

I asked participants about how one’s social situation affects how one feels called by God to a particular vocation. In the movie, one of the help states that she wanted to do more than be a part of the help, but that her mother was a part of the help and that her grandmother was a slave. One of the participants thought that the actress’ family “did not have aspirations and that if the actress had felt called by God to do more than she might have had more will to reach her goals.” Another participant, with a differing point of view, said that “She would have followed God’s voice, but she was influenced by her background.” It became more nuanced when a different participant said that “Her race affected her dreams. Obviously she is being called to do something else, but she just can’t.” As aforementioned, one’s experience with social systems affect one’s constructed theology. It is clear that spiritual formation must include the struggle that is explained in this case study. We bring awareness to the reality of social systems within our theologies

and cannot compartmentalize parts of our faith with our social systems. Jesus, and every other religious figure for that matter, did not live in a vacuum. Jesus lived in a particular time and place. Jesus could have been born in the power capital of the world of his day - Rome.

Similarly, I wonder where Jesus would be born today. Jesus was born in a poor country that was dominated by an outside imperial power. He spoke out against compartmentalization of faith and caring for the poor. He was put to death because he was a threat to the social norms of his day. I am beginning to think that Jesus would be born in the garbage dump in Managua, Nicaragua. He would live his life speaking out against the ongoing damaging effects of colonization, industrialization, and globalization. He would likely either die an early death because of his difficult living conditions or he would be killed by an outside imperial power such as the United States as it “intervened” in Nicaragua as they were seeking to create a new Christian social order similar to Walter Rauschenbusch. This social order was seen as a Communist threat just as Jesus was seen as a threat with his teachings about the Kingdom of God or, as I prefer and have stated in this paper, God’s dream for creation.

The discussion of blessing juxtaposed to the movie scene about a tornado killing both whites and African-Americans was also a point of discussion. One participant wrote that “God’s grace is open to all.” It is a great reminder that we are called to extend blessings to all just as the quote goes (pointed out by a participant), “Rain falls on the just and the unjust.”

One participant thought that it was important differentiate the levels of power. In the movie, there was a “power to subvert and power in the help cooking great food.

White males had naked power, wives didn't have as much power but they made it work.” Perhaps, this goes back to a different participant's comment, aforementioned, that we can all show God's glory in our own way. Other participants responded to the statement about levels of power wondering if it is a way for us to justify our power. This seems to be a wonderful point of discussion in the future for spiritual formation. I would pose these questions. In what ways are there varying levels of power? How do we try to justify or defend our access to power? How does one show God's glory in their context of inequality?

## FINAL THOUGHTS

I am thankful to the participants in my case study. I am mindful of the composition of the room. It is clear that learning in a diverse environment is better than a homogeneous group. Sadly, most churches are segregated for the most part by race and/or class. We also divide up our small groups into age groups or genders. I am mindful of a new church near my home called the “Generation Church” that specifically divides groups by their genders and ages. I believe that all of this is not helpful for spiritual formation. We are impoverished by our denominational theologies because most of them came out of a time and experience that juxtaposing one view against another that is unable to defend itself. The Modern Ecumenical Movement has helped Lutheran and Roman Catholics realize that they were saying similar statements five hundred years ago, but failed to listen to one another. We are products of this miscommunication. In order to be a part of what I believe God is doing in the world, we

need to construct our theologies together. Therefore, if someone wants to claim that women should not be ordained ministers then they have to construct and defend that theology with women in the room!

As I reflect back upon this group discussion and subsequent discussions about the topic, I wonder what people expect me to want them to answer. For example, most people who simply know that I am a minister, will likely think that I want them to attribute everything that they have to God. It was usually when I would say something such as “I wonder if God is really for such inequality” that most people would begin to be blunt and honest with me about this issue. I had to open the door for them because of some expected answer that lies within our society. My hope is that this writing does the same for others - I give them a door in which to walk through to struggle with the difference between privilege, blessing, and luck.

Do we have to have this conversation?

I may be alone in this struggle, but the conversation needs to happen. Sadly, we are too blind to privilege in our world. Jesus often confronted these systems; Jesus was not always meek and mild. He did not look as if he was European. We may have been fooled with the spiritual formation offered by the colonization forces, but we do not have to pass on this original sin.

Rome, as some knew it, has been destroyed. We needed it to be destroyed. It became our golden calf instead of the place in which Paul took the gospel. Similarly, we

need to have our constructions of God that serve as tools of domination to be destroyed. We can build thicker and higher walls such Trump does, but God wants them destroyed, for our safety. We need this conversation so that all of the walls that we have built up and defended in various crusades can be torn down. God is offering us intellect. The first question is whether we want it. The second is if we want to use it for our gain or the blessing of all. Michelangelo was trying to tell us something as we worship below the painting. I hope that we will look up to it and across to see our neighbors. If that can happen, we will need to paint something else!



## CHAPTER SIX: CAN'T I JUST BE A BLESSING?

I played baseball growing up. My first year was in “coach pitch” baseball. It was one step up from tee-ball and a step below young kids throwing baseballs at your head. Yes, I am speaking of my first at bat in that older league! I was decent before being hit in the head with a baseball!

In fact, my team played in our league championship game. It was an exciting time for our team. We were in elementary school, so it meant the world to us to win such a game. It came down to the bottom half of the last inning. My team was down by one run. There were runners on second and third. It was every kid’s dream!

In coach pitch baseball, each batter had either three strikes or nine pitches when batting. If the batter did not swing at the nine pitches, they would be called out. There were no walks in this type of baseball. I came into the batter’s box in the dream situation.

I could be the hero or be blamed for the loss.

I did not swing at the first few pitches. My coach reminded me that I had to start swinging or I would be called out. Still, I was not getting the perfect pitch. After, eight pitches from my coach, he became worried about me. Perhaps, I am sure, there was some frustration too. Finally, on the last possible pitch, I took a swing and hit it right up the middle! My team won the game! It was glorious. We celebrated with a BBQ and cake.

I remember us singing the song, “We are the Champions.”

Somebody had to win the game; others had to lose. It was life, right? Little did everyone know, I had received an autograph from my favorite sport’s player. Ever since I got it, I began touching the signature. Since then, we were undefeated. I had my little

secret! I had the advantage that others did not.

As I reflect upon that occasion, I wonder if we won because I had a good luck charm or if I simply decided to swing! Is it possible for others to have secret capabilities that others do not have access to and call it blessing, skill in baseball, or extensive baseball practices. Is it possible for me to live in a fairy tale world that causes me to win by rubbing my hands on the autograph?

## WE SHALL OVERCOME

I believe that we have agency in this world. We are not hopelessly stuck in a world where we act out a pre-written script that God has planned out for us. Furthermore, we are not prisoners to some natural order that pits races, classes, religions, and other identity markers against one another. We are, actually, prisoners to something. I do not believe that it is back in Egypt. It is *something* that is closer to our own making than we may realize. The good news (the Gospel) is that we are far from helpless to change it and ourselves.<sup>90</sup>

## SOME PREFER TO BE BLIND

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<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 4.

The ease of not being aware of my privilege is, actually, an aspect of privilege itself. Some call it the luxury of obliviousness. Philosophers call it “epistemic privilege.” Being able to see and being aware requires effort and commitment. Being able to command the attention of lower-status individuals without having it in return is a key aspect of privilege in any society.<sup>91</sup>

Privilege is not something bestowed on us specifically. Instead, it appears as a fabric of life, as the norm.<sup>92</sup> I used to not be aware of how my white, middle class, and heterosexual privileges made it easier for me in the world. However, once you see, you cannot go back to being blind. The scary part for me, as a pastor, is when pastors and theologians claim to be representing Truth or the former glory days in their proclamation about society. It is a form of dominating others when one hides behind their reading of the Bible as they state that it is “Truth.” Some may have heard of the phrase: “God said it, I believe it, so that settles it.” If only life were that easy, I could be blind!

## THE BRAIN

The brain “humanizes” reality. We need order and meaning to cope in this world. Our brains seem to be wired to help us with a changing world as we seek to make sense

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, 3.

of it all.<sup>93</sup> The world is, thankfully, much different than when the Bible was written. The Bible was written over a span of approximately 1,500 years, in three languages, and various countries. We need to constantly examine how we make sense of our surroundings. We often have to use metaphors to do so. They need to be continually updated and upgraded or they replace what we are actually trying to make sense of in the world.

As a pastor, I long for Sabbath. It does not always occur on Sunday since it is not a day of rest for me. Sabbath was created to help creation rest from its toils. Our bodies need time for rest; specifically, our brains need it too. REM sleep is the deep form of sleeping cycles. REM sleep builds bridges between the biological brain and the psychological mind. The combination of brain-mind activation and motor inhibition unites sensory perception with emotion. This causes memories and associations to form. In other words, it helps us make meaning of our surroundings. REM sleep has been found in all mammals, appearing first in the womb. Extreme sleep deprivation can even make people forget their identity.<sup>94</sup> This is beginning to make sense to me now.

We seem to be needing more REM sleep. Literally, we live in a sleep deprived society. There are plenty of sleep aids on the store shelves. We need to spend more time making sense of all of this chaos around us. Our brains are wired to help us do it, but we do not have the time or, perhaps, willingness to make sense of the world *alongside* others.

Our brains are gifts from God to help us in this world. For its size, in its structure

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<sup>93</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, 43.

<sup>94</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, 96.

and functioning, our brains are the most complex entity known in the universe.<sup>95</sup> Why would we not use them in constructing our faiths? The symbolizing capacity frees us from the constraints of a totally deterministic environment. The capacity to imagine, to construct, to play, which comes from the emergence of the newer portions of our brains - the neocortex - is a central ingredient in religion.<sup>96</sup> We must be honest with how our brains and its composition and processes affect our religion that aims to make sense in a chaotic world.

We have always been seeking to respond to a larger meaning-making universe than we can create. Archaeological evidence of religious observances indicates that we have been religious for as long as we have been *Homo sapiens*. Some say that it may even go back as far as our pre-*Homo sapien ancestors*.<sup>97</sup> We, as humans, have always sought something more than themselves. Whatever the “something” is, too often, it has been used to destroy God’s created diversity.

Males and females tend to experience meaning making differently. Both their brains and their upbringing differ in a variety of ways. Each gender’s genetic and temperamental factors affect their experiences. In short, different genes and experiences make for different realities. These differences make it to where we experience things differently. On the other hand, it provides richness to the human experience.<sup>98</sup> These differences are enriching to all until you include privilege and power. It changes things when one group can write the theology or control the conversation. It is scary to think how one privileged group and shape our understanding of God.

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<sup>95</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, 154.

<sup>96</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, xxi-xxii.

<sup>98</sup> Ashbrook and Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*, xxx-xxxiv.

## CONSTRUCTING A BETTER THEOLOGY

We draw on everything that we know through lived experience to construct a theology. I have a great relationship with my father, but never everyone does. Thus, saying “Father God” is not accessible to everyone. In short, one’s experiences shape how they construct a theology.

The Puritans launched a holy vision for a new land that held no place for Africans or Native Americans. They were political leaders who owned slaves. It is no wonder that *their* Christianity allowed them to view the world in ways that was best for them. Their Christianity allowed them to own slaves. I wonder what *my* Christianity allows me to do. For the Puritans, it allowed them to understand God as not making a covenant with Africans or Native Americans, so the Puritans had every right to treat them in atrocious ways. Our brains make sense of things for our preservation, but it does not mean that it allows us to see others as less than ourselves and disregard the destruction of others.

It is sad that in certain cases, people are persuaded to believe something that is against their best interest. We can see this in Latin America for over four centuries. Religion was used to justify the exploitation and oppression carried out by colonizing forces. Meanwhile, the religious institutions sought to convince the oppressed people that their suffering was the will of God.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Donal Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power, and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 154.

I am becoming convinced that if theology does is not deliberately used to give power and enable equality of all peoples then it will almost certainly be used to take away power and cause injustice from people. If I am dominating you then I am attempting to deprive you of a part of your responsibility and dignity. In short, I am trying to rob you of your humanity. In turn, as I am seeking to dominate you, I am depriving myself of part of my own humanity because I am acting inhumanly.<sup>100</sup> All of us want order from a chaotic world. Sadly, the search for order within the power reach of few ends up causing disorder.

I was satisfied with the reflection of the participants. The discussion was fruitful and eye opening to them. I could sense that there was a change in tone in the participants before and after the movie and discussion. It is the beginning of their journey. I began by shining the light on the issue. Now, we search for what was previously hidden so that we can move forward as individuals and as a congregation.

As I reflect upon that occasion, I wonder if we wonder because I had a good luck charm or if I simply decided to swing and got lucky! Is it possible for others to have secret capabilities that others do not have access to and call it blessing, skill in baseball, or extensive baseball practices. Is it possible for me to live in a fairy tale world that causes me to win by rubbing my hands on an autograph?

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<sup>100</sup> Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power, and the Church*, 154.

I would lose part of my humanity if I thought that my rubbing of an autograph gave me power over others. I would be damaging the world if I thought that I was privileged over others and called it being blessed. It seems primitive and scary in a world full of diversity and the capacity to destroy one another. Having said that, we are not helpless in this world.

There is extreme poverty and wealth living side by side. It is important to realize how this gap occurred and how it is continuing to expand. I am not blessed at the expense of others. It is not a blessing to be of a certain ethnic group, class, or sexual orientation group. We do not have to try to “save” ourselves from others who are different from us. Furthermore, we do not have to construct theologies that are threatening to others while calling it “Truth.”

We need REM sleep. We need to step back from all of the chaos and see how our theological and sociological constructions, which feed off of one another, affect our world. Our cultural and theological constructions have allowed us to enslave and oppress one another. When we do that, we both lose our humanity. When that happens, nobody should be singing “We are the Champions.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN: HOW WOULD BLESSING LOOK?

I am grateful for individuals in my life who have caused me to rethink aspects of my life.

I had a professor in seminary who said that our excess steals from those who have less. His statement hit my heart. I continue to think about his statement. I think about it when

I look in my closet and see a plethora of clothes. I have to ask myself, “Is my excess causing others to not have clothes?” It is easy to defend one’s self, but it is more difficult to consider the topic.

I rarely wear some of those shirts; others have only one or two. Others such as Jesus living 2,000 years ago would have likely only owned one shirt. I wonder if God has blessed me to be able to buy all of these nice clothes when others are eager to be blessed with my hand-me-downs. There are a finite number of clothes in the world, right? I wonder how this relates to Jesus feeding the multitudes.<sup>101</sup>

Has God blessed my excess? Is it causing others to not have clothes?

## WHAT BLESSING IS NOT

Religions that focus on the power to bring curses on one’s enemies scare me. Their effectiveness is weighed by their ability to threat by curse and taboo against another.<sup>102</sup> As a follower of Jesus, I can see that the gospel is bound up in the fact that God drew humanity’s outrage and curse upon God’s own self without cursing humanity

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<sup>101</sup> Luke 9:10-17 NRSV

<sup>102</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 15-16.

back. In fact, God reacted with a blessing towards humanity. This different than a primitive understand of God which is a warrior type of god. Instead, God robs humanity of its all too common lust for poisonous power to destroy one's brother or sister. In other words, our desire to destroy one another in God's name is replaced by our privilege to bless one another in God's name.<sup>103</sup> I am thankful that God has encouraged us from viewing God as a power to curse. I hope that we can realize God's desired relationship with all of creation.

Within the Bible, one can see blessing as a type of magical power.<sup>104</sup> We can see it in the story of Jacob receiving the blessing.<sup>105</sup> Jacob receives Isaac's blessing one time. It cannot be canceled and it works unconditionally. Esau, Jacob's brother, was supposed to receive the blessing. The name Jacob in Hebrew sounds eerily familiar to the Hebrew word for deceiver. I think that all of us are deceived if we believe that blessings are finite and worth being stolen from one another!

Primitive religion was often associated with war. Warring communities would seek their blessing from their gods to help them win the battle. Christians should not feel superior in this situation because we can find texts in the Bible that sound similar. These texts say such statements as "just be still and God will do the fighting."<sup>106</sup> General William Tecumseh Sherman in the Civil War said it correctly when he said that "war is hell."<sup>107</sup> It is hell for all of creation when we seek a loving God's blessing to help us kill another in battle or in our daily lives. Furthermore, it is hell for all of us when we seek God's blessing at the expense of another. What type of God would be for one over

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<sup>103</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 56.

<sup>105</sup> Genesis 27:1-40 NRSV

<sup>106</sup> Exodus 14:14 NRSV

<sup>107</sup> Maquire, *The Horrors We Bless*, 13.

others?

As we ponder the above question, it is easy to think about the occupation of Canaan in the Bible. Victors write the histories; victors also construct the theologies. I struggle with the notion of God supporting such destruction. I am aware that the biblical writers thought that God was on their side and helping them be victorious in battle. However, it may not be reality from a historical point of view. It was simply interpreted that way. For example, a football coach can say that God has blessed his team in victory and that God was the one helping the ball go through the air to be caught by the receiver. We can view it from that point of view or many others. I could look at it as the hours of practice that the team did truly paid off for them. I could also see how the coach called the correct play. I may spend some time investigating the resources put into the winning team compared to the team that lost. The opposing fans may say that it was all luck. The point is that there is reality and many different ways to interpret it. We need to hear more voices in our discernment process.

#### WHAT BLESSING CAN LOOK LIKE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Meaningful religion speaks of rebirth and bringing creation to a state of blessing. In order to get there, we need to free ourselves from the feeling of “curse.”<sup>108</sup> I would define the curse as the desire to look to a higher power to be privileged against another or the desire to look to a higher power to support one’s privilege.

The greatest power of a primitive religion was the ability to curse another. I believe that God is constantly trying to teach us this reality. It did not begin with Jesus.

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<sup>108</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 15.

The new thing in religion came with Abraham. It was the desire and intent of God to bless the entire world. It was, in fact, a power that was stronger than cursing others.<sup>109</sup> It completely changes our relationship with God. Instead of seeking to use God for our own privilege, God is seeking to use us to bless all of creation.

As I investigate blessing further, there always seems to be a sending forth. It is similar to what some do in church on Sunday morning during the benediction. The biblical phrase “bless me and let me go” reminds us of our calling. It cuts us of our dependence and binding ties to one community to the world that needs to be blessed.<sup>110</sup> The power of blessing is more than mere love. It is the very renewal of life itself as the power to beget. It means to heal and to make alive. For Christians, it can mean to be “born again.”<sup>111</sup> I can also see it as resurrecting a world that is dead to itself as it creates a hell of privilege and a god that supports and fights for that privilege.

Scholars tell us that the original meaning of blessing in the Bible is the bestowal of fertility.<sup>112</sup> Blessing as fertility is the center of life for families and their farms. It was a positive power which gave Israel the chance to survive.<sup>113</sup> Still though, in today’s world of biogenetics and most people lacking the ability to get their own food, it has to mean more than fertility.

In the gospels, it is clear that the bestowal of blessing was communicated by the laying on of hands.<sup>114</sup> Could it be that we are called to bless the world through the communal work of our hands? We can reach out and sympathize with those in need. Our hands communicate a healing touch - restless children becoming quite, a distraught

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<sup>109</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Genesis 32:22-32 NRSV

<sup>111</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 144-145.

<sup>112</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, 165.

<sup>113</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 84.

person made aware that someone cares, and the hug that shows acceptance rather than rejection.<sup>115</sup> Just as how two humans can help create life, so, too, does blessing come from another. When Abraham blessed Isaac, he passed his life in some unique way to his son. The blessing, here, means the willingness of one to die for another to live.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps, we are getting to the true meaning of blessing with this early biblical story; blessing means to give up something so that others can experience the fullness of life. Surely, that is what Jesus did for us on the cross when he acted as a political threat to the dominating power of Rome. The cross was the tool of domination and power. Jesus sought to tear down such privilege; for God's sake, we are called to do the same.

#### HOW DO WE GET TO A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF BLESSING?

Blindness to our misuse of the term blessing is not terminal. We can return to a more fruitful and honest understanding of this important term. The greatest barrier to this change is that the dominant group does not see it as *their* trouble, so they do not feel that they need to do anything. This happens because we do not know that it exists in the first place, we do not have to see it as our trouble, we see it as a personal rather than systemic problem, we are reluctant to give up our privilege, we feel angry and deprived and closed to the idea that we belong to a privileged group, we are blinded by our prejudice, or that we are afraid what will happen if we acknowledge the reality of the situation.<sup>117</sup>

Blessing seems to be focused too much on the individual's gain. In the story of Abraham, it seems to be for the gain of the entire world. It seems as if we need to look at

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<sup>115</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 44-45.

<sup>116</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 142.

<sup>117</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 140.

in a collective manner with special regard for equitable access, use, and sustainability. It can follow the idea of the commons where wealth of valuable assets belong to everyone that lives in the shadows of our market culture.<sup>118</sup> It actually sounds refreshing and similar to the early church.<sup>119</sup> Yes, the early church was not a capitalist society. Sadly, religious communities have sometimes acted as obstacles to the promotion of human rights.<sup>120</sup>

I do not aim to start a discourse of capitalism versus blessing. It is clear that we cannot separate service from healing nor can one separate healing from blessing.<sup>121</sup> Blessing seems to be giving up something in order for someone else to have. Some may call it socialist, but it seems to be a biblical understanding of blessing. It is something that seemed worth living and dying for - at least for Jesus.

### SO WHAT...NOW?

We need to be sent out. We need to go to the places that Jesus would be going. We need to acknowledge that we are privileged, but that we can still be a blessing to those who are underprivileged. The blessing takes on meaning wherever we go. For some, it is overcoming globalization's devastating reach while others continue to struggle for gender equality.

After being beaten at the hands of the police in Los Angeles in 1991, Rodney

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<sup>118</sup> Jay Walljasper, *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* (New York: The New Press) 2-4.

<sup>119</sup> Acts 4:32-35 NRSV

<sup>120</sup> David Hollenbach, "Ecumenical Perspectives on Religious Freedom and Human Rights: Response to John Witte," in *Violence and Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Conversation*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis (Geneva: WCC Publications; Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 212.

<sup>121</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 150.

King asked: “Can’t we all just get along?”<sup>122</sup> It was an important question for that community at that time. I believe that we can also ask the Christian community around the world, particularly those Christians in the Global North, a tough question: “Can’t we simply be a blessing?” If we are going to ask ourselves this tough question, we must know that we are privileged. This privilege is not ordained by God as a sign of blessing. It is the opposite; God blesses so that privilege can be dismantled systematically for the sake of the world.

Lani Guinier was reading the *Sesame Street* magazine with her four-year-old son, Nikolas. The magazine showed four children raising their hands to play tag while two voted to play hide-and-seek. Guinier explained that the magazine wanted the reader to focus on counting to decide what game the kids will play. Nikolas said, “They will play both. First, they will play tag. Then they will play hide-and-seek.” Despite what the magazine was trying to teach as a rule, Nikolas was correct. Childhood innocence has an intuitively inclusive view of the world. Sadly, kids learn the categories and boundaries as a part of the thinking and socialization process. In other words, inclusiveness that comes naturally (as some would say “from God”) becomes undermined.<sup>123</sup> We need rules in this world, but why not keep the rules that we seem to be born with?

I suppose that we are wrestling with not only God’s nature but also our nature as humans. Tertullian posed the question: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” We can ask what does Jerusalem to do with Washington? What has faith to do with the state?<sup>124</sup> We need to discern our role and God’s role in the world that has too much excess and, sadly, too much poverty.

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<sup>122</sup> Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, 161-2.

<sup>124</sup> Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, 7.

*Has God blessed my excess? Is it causing others to not have clothes?*

Jesus lived a life of blessing. One can look to the feeding of the multitudes or to the way in which he was killed. His aim was not to curse those who were persecuting him, but to bless them. He encourages us to do the same.<sup>125</sup> We are offered to replace our desire to destroy with the power to give life and bless one another.

Blessing is worth fighting for, but it is not something that one can fight for against another at their expense. It is not a magical power. Blessing is not about convincing a high power that you are more worthy than your enemy. We need to go to God to help us be a blessing in the world instead of seeking out our own privilege.

Blessing means to give up something so that others can experience the fullness of life. It can mean giving up your excess clothes in order for someone to have worth and protection from a rainy night. This is the life in which Jesus lived.

I am beginning to realize that I, and others in a position of privilege, are the biggest barriers to changing privilege. God has not blessed my excess; it is a product of my privilege. It is the cause for the hell in which we find in the world that is full of wars. We are fighting over finite things, blessings are not one of those things. The early Christians in Acts 4 knew it. I wish that today's Christians did.

In order for privileged individuals to be a blessing, we need to focus on service and healing a broken world. The brokenness of the world is the product of such division. Perhaps, this is why we cannot just get along. God did not create these systems of privilege and domination, but God can help us dismantle them and our worshipping of them as false idols.

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<sup>125</sup> Luke 6:28 NRSV



SECTION C: ENTERING INTO THE PROMISED LAND OF GOD'S DREAM FOR  
CREATION

CHAPTER EIGHT: GOD'S DREAM IS SPREAD UPON THE EARTH BUT WE  
CANNOT YET SEE IT

My theological education, as aforementioned, took me to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Most groups traveling between the two countries would simply take a quick flight from one to the other. My professors, on the other hand, wanted my group to experience what it was like to cross a border.

It was a great idea. I am grateful that they did it, but I could not fully experience what it was like to cross from Nicaragua, the poorer country, into Costa Rica, the richer country, without being in the position of privilege. There were probably hundreds of people in line at the border trying to cross. The pain of waiting in a long line crosses all cultures. Yet, we had United States passports, so we were able to skip the line and go to the front.

It is similar to "skip the line passes" that one can buy at an amusement park. I will never forget the look on the faces of other human beings as we simply walked past the line that they had been waiting in for many hours. It hurt to look back, once on the Costa Rican side of the border, to see my privilege hit them in the face.

Is the world created in such a way where some can skip the line while others can wait?

Where is God in the midst of this situation?

IS THE WORLD STACKED AGAINST SOME AND FOR OTHERS?

If I am honest, it seems as if the world is stacked against some and for others. One can see how certain countries remain in poverty since colonization or another point in time while others “progress.” Some, such as Pat Robertson, will say that Haiti continues to have problems because they made a deal with the devil in 1804. For me, he is leaving out all of the social systems that keep Haiti poor. We can see the effects of colonization and globalization as we compare Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both countries share the island known as Hispaniola. Haiti has long been savaged by its own political leaders and foreign ones.<sup>126</sup> I would say that the devil is not needed to make this place hell, we are doing a good job by ourselves!

One can say that 1492, when Columbus set sail, was a long time ago. Jesus, too, lived a long time ago. I see our calling as one of following in Jesus’ footsteps. We must not forget that it was Jesus who threw some tables around in an effort to help set the world back on a path of wholeness. Being blessed cannot be contained by those who regularly go to church. It is much more than that, thankfully. Blessing can mean many things in the Bible. It can mean growth, maturity, prosperity, and the bearing of good fruit which translates as well-being.<sup>127</sup>

The desire for blessing can be found in various cultures. Interpersonal relationships were impossible without God’s blessing. It can be seen in the traditional Hebrew greeting “The Lord be with you” and the response “The Lord bless you.”<sup>128</sup> It can be experienced in other greetings such as *shalom* (Hebrew for peace), *eirene* (Greek

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<sup>126</sup> Alexandra Silver, “Haiti and the Dominican Republic: A Tale of Two Countries,” Last modified January 19, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1953959,00.html>.

<sup>127</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 67.

<sup>128</sup> Rivard, *Blessing the World*, 27.

for peace), *salem* (Arabic for peace), *salus* (Latin for safety), and *heil* (Middle High German for safe or whole).<sup>129</sup> It seems as if the desire for peace from the initial greeting is the hope of humanity.

## WHO IS AT FAULT

Jesus rejects the disciples' suggestion that a man's blindness must have been caused either by his own or his parents' sin.<sup>130</sup> This was the common assumption of Jesus' day - suffering was caused from sin. It is a kind of tit-for-tat approach to religion and life. This type of thought prefers jurisprudence to grace.<sup>131</sup> Sadly, this mindset is still present in the twenty-first century in the thought that God helps those who help themselves.

Analysis means that we look at the social structures that affect our lives and cause human suffering. It is easy to blame sin, but what is the exact sin that we are referencing here. The Bible seems to suggest that oppression, not laziness, is the main cause of poverty.<sup>132</sup> Our calling is clear that we are supposed to correct oppression as well as give charity.<sup>133</sup> I must be honest in my assessment of how I contribute to the sin of oppression.

Both Matthew and Luke's gospels begin by relating Jesus to the oppressive empire. Matthew writes, "In the time of King Herod."<sup>134</sup> Luke pens, "In those days a

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<sup>129</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 60.

<sup>130</sup> John 9 NRSV

<sup>131</sup> Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, 76.

<sup>132</sup> George S. Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering* (San Marcos: George S. Johnson, 2000), 62.

<sup>133</sup> Isaiah 1:17 NRSV

<sup>134</sup> Matthew 2:1 NRSV

decree went out from Emperor Augustus.”<sup>135</sup> It seems evident that these writings are foreshadowing a confrontation with the oppressive empire. Jesus was raised in Nazareth which was occupied by the Romans. The Roman Empire had invaded and occupied Palestine in 63 B.C.E. They burnt the villages, enslaved the people, and killed the elderly and the sick. Rome considered the Judeans “as good for nothing by slavery.” Just prior to Jesus’ birth, the nearby town of Sepphoris was burned and its inhabitants were enslaved.<sup>136</sup> Jesus knew oppression. I believe that he still does. This does not bode well for those who claim their privilege as blessing. Nothing could be further from the mindset of Jesus.

It seems too easy. Oppression causes poverty. Jesus knew both of those things. He tried to stand up to them. He was crucified for it. We are called to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world that is full of people confusing privilege or luck with blessing.

## BEING AWARE

Preaching on the fourth of July is difficult for me. I find it hard to talk about God and patriotism. I have to walk a fine line. I understand the desire for singing patriotic songs during church; it scares me when we are in a state of war (which seems to be quite common). I remember when the song during the seventh inning stretch of a baseball game used to be “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” Now, it is “God Bless America.” I remember the first time that I heard the “This Is My Song” by Lloyd Stone and Georgia

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<sup>135</sup> Luke 2:1 NRSV

<sup>136</sup> Boesak and DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, 43-45.

Harkness to the tune of Finlandia Hymn melody.<sup>137</sup> It is sometimes called “A Song of Peace.” I remember looking at the pianist at my church, who chose the song, with disbelief in a theologically grounded song on the fourth of July.

The authors of this hymn are aware of one’s relationship to God while living in a pluralistic world. It is quite amazing. The authors realize that God is at work in and for other parts of the world. It gives attention to my struggle.

Jesus and all of the Bible give far more attention to the poor than what one hears in churches today. It is clear that what we see or do not see in the Bible is often influenced by our situation - race, class, gender, and privilege.<sup>138</sup>

We must also be mindful that the Bible is written in a much different situation than the one in which we find ourselves. In the Old Testament, the Israelites often act as though only the Hebrews have full status with God. Even God, at times, commands the destruction of non-Hebrews.<sup>139</sup> I invite you to read or re-read this text in light of my current struggle. It is hard to believe, but many people are seeking God’s help in the same destructive ways.

One can also see a chilling account of cultural genocide in which the Hebrews kill all of the Canaanite men and enslave the women.<sup>140</sup> One scholar defends this writing by stating that strangers must be destroyed because, in the presenting of other gods as viable candidates for worship, these people threaten Israel’s identity as the people of the

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<sup>137</sup> Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness, “This Is My Song” (No. 722) in *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995). Originally published in *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

<sup>138</sup> Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*, 43.

<sup>139</sup> Exodus 14 NRSV

<sup>140</sup> Numbers 31 NRSV

covenant.<sup>141</sup>

We do not live in that time nor should we live in the same mindset. We must be aware that as we love our sacred texts that they contain timely and timeless things. It is possible that this text was timely for the Israelites to think that way about their neighbors. However, this story does not have to be the timeless rubric through which we view all of our neighbors who are different than us.

### GOD'S BLESSING IS NOT A ZERO SUM EXPERIENCE

It is becoming clear to me that most wealth is acquired at the expense of others who are exploited.<sup>142</sup> One needs to only look to the United States, Mayans, Greeks, and Ancient Egyptians (just to name a few). Sadly, as previously stated, religion often supports the oppression. Suffering must also be a part of the discussion. Suffering is not normal nor is it a required part of the human experience. Oddly enough, it challenges the very nature of our progress as a species.<sup>143</sup> God does not desire more suffering. I believe that God desires more action for the defense of the oppressed.

Jesus reminded the religious leaders that they gave too much attention to ritual purity while neglecting the more important matter of justice.<sup>144</sup> It is easier to be a part of the "City of Man" that cares more about self-love than the "City of God," as St. Augustine coined it. The City of God recognizes its dependence on God, seeks wisdom, surrenders itself on a lifelong pilgrimage, and worships God. The City of Man, on the

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<sup>141</sup> Teel, *Racism and the Image of God*, 3.

<sup>142</sup> Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*, 80.

<sup>143</sup> Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, 38.

<sup>144</sup> Matthew 23:23 NRSV

other hand, believes itself to be all powerful, lusts for domination, covets money and possessions, and worships its own glory.<sup>145</sup> In the end, the City of God brings joy to all while the City of Man causes its own destruction. I wonder if we are treading down the path of the latter as we confuse privilege and luck as blessing. This act of disguising is a threat to all of us sharing God's earth.

### A GARDEN AS THE CITY OF GOD

One of the best acts of my congregation is that we recently ripped up 5,000 square feet of ivy to put in an organic garden. We give all of the produce to a local food bank. We turned unfruitful land into fruitful land. We took away our unproductive time trimming the ivy in order for us to be able to be productive with our energies in serving others.

I think that I am ready to tackle the issue of labeling privilege, luck, and blessing. If the produce from the garden were a product of luck than one would find the food on a hike. They did not take any action to find or plant the food. They just happened to be walking down the correct path at the right time. If the produce from the garden were a product of privilege than we would build a wall to protect what was rightfully ours from the threat of others. We may even hire a guard or install a security system. We would keep all of the produce for those living within the wall even as it rotted away due to the excess at times of harvest. Our garden would outgrow other gardens every year. We would try to save the excess by processing it with preservatives. Oddly enough, the preservatives would end up making us sick. Finally, if the produce is a product of

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<sup>145</sup> Bass, *Broken We Kneel: Reflections on Faith and Citizenship*, 22.

blessing, which I believe that it is, then we give it away to those who need it. We do not kill ourselves with preservatives or efforts to protect what is ours because it all belongs to God. Since it is a blessing, we have to be careful of the possibility that we try to keep it for ourselves. Perhaps, I finally have a metaphor through which to try to understand my struggle!

The intent of the gospel is to bring the blessing of Abraham to more than one child, bloodline, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and so on. The gospel is about expanding the umbrella of God's loving care to all.<sup>146</sup> We do not have to fight for the umbrella, there is plenty of room. We do not have to claim it as our deserved blessing, God wants all to experience shalom.

We can fight over the meaning of blessing. We can find where the word is located throughout the Bible and our lives, but that would be missing the point. The notion of blessing goes beyond just the word "blessing." It has other meanings such as "to multiply," "to mature," "to succeed," "to bear fruit," and "peace and presence."<sup>147</sup>

My struggle is nothing new to people who are aware of those around them. John Chrysostom wrote this statement in the fourth century: "Tell me then, whence thou art rich? The root and origin of it must have been injustice. Why? Because God in the beginning made not one man rich, and another poor. Nor did God afterward take and show to one treasures of gold, and deny to the other the right of searching for it; but God left the earth free to all alike. Why then, it is common, have you so many areas of land, while your neighbor has not a portion of it."<sup>148</sup> John Chrysostom penned these words as Christianity came into power through the conversation of Constantine. *Being powerful*

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<sup>146</sup> Madden, *The Power to Bless*, 152-3.

<sup>147</sup> Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 66.

<sup>148</sup> Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*, 78.



*and in control does not make us Christian. Instead, it makes us the ones who occupy Jesus' home, who cause injustice, who bear the brunt of the message of Jesus, and, ultimately, crucify Jesus to try to stop his message from spreading. That effort did not get its desired result!*

## OUR CALLING

The crucifixion of Jesus was a public spectacle of cruelty meant to terrorize the masses with the oppressive force of the Romans. The Romans would put the crucifixions near the roads leading into the city. Thus, it was clear, you knew who was in charge when you entered the city. I think that we need to flip the script in our society. We need to crucify privilege when it is described as a blessing. We need to make it a public act. If not, we continue to support the empires of social systems that oppress the masses.

The cross, in its height of use in the Roman Empire, was a signature on the edge of town of their power. Later, it became a symbol of hope for freedom from the forces of domination. Sadly, most people today see the cross as a symbol of domination, not freedom. We need to crucify our privilege when it is cloaked as privilege.

I was able to visit the ancient city of Corinth in 2012. One cannot help but notice the overwhelming mountain above the city. Greek mythology portrays a character named Sisyphus, the ruler of Corinth whom the god Tartarus punished in a cruel and unusual way: Each day Sisyphus had to push a huge stone up a mountain. It took an all out effort by Sisyphus to do the task. At the end of the day, the stone escapes Sisyphus and the stone rolls back to the bottom of the mountain. In other words, all of the labors of

Sisyphus were futile. The next day began the task all over again. I see the struggle against social systems in the same sphere. It takes all of our time and energy in this uphill battle. We can lose it all in the glimpse of a second.

The Bible tells us about heavy stones too. Jesus called on his friends to remove the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb after he had been dead for four days.<sup>149</sup> Later, Jesus was buried in a similar tomb blocked by a huge stone.<sup>150</sup> I believe that another stone must be rolled away in Christ's name and it is going to be an uphill battle - the stone of privilege cloaked as blessing.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by social systems and big stones. Guilt plays a factor. It is painful, disturbing, and even debilitating. Sometimes, those guilty try to avoid the issue. Other times, guilt leads us to compensate with hyperactivity that leads us feeling tired. At best, guilt is a motivator, if we give it due and appropriate attention. Left to itself, however, guilt does little to sustain us in the long haul.<sup>151</sup> Guilt can affect us, but it cannot act or debilitate us in these moments.

We are addicted to the notion of privilege as blessing. We need to wonder in the desert for a while, but not get lost in the guilt. Frederick Buechner wrote it in his book, *The Longing for Home*, "When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbor's sake that He commanded it, but for our own sakes as well. Not to help find some way to feed the children who are starving to death is to have some precious part of who we are starve to death with them."<sup>152</sup> The journey from slavery to privilege may belong to those of privilege, but it matters to us all. May it be so

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<sup>149</sup> John 11:1-44 NRSV

<sup>150</sup> Luke 24:1-12 NRSV

<sup>151</sup> Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*, 56.

<sup>152</sup> Johnson, *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering*, 157.

in order for all to be blessed.

*Is the world created in such a way where some can skip the line while others can wait?*

*Where is God in the midst of this situation?*

It is clear that those with privilege usually try to keep it. They use whatever means necessary in doing so, including religion. Religion has acting as a “super pac” in the effort to support oppression when it should be doing the opposite. God did not create it this way. Jesus was always confronting domination and removing stones of oppression. There is no need for a devil for the hell that we have made for ourselves.

God’s blessings need to be able to extend throughout the world for good fruit to bear in all lives. It can be called “shalom,” “saalem,” or “paix.” It does not matter, God calls it good; it is a part of God’s dream for humanity. God seems to be active in the world confronting the sin of oppression that causing poverty and suffering in the world. This poverty and suffering is not within God’s dream for the world; it is a nightmare for all of us, including those of privilege.

Jesus knew oppression in his day. It does not look too different today. In the face of an oppressive world, we look for God to be on our side. It seems to be more fruitful to contemplate if we are on God’s side. God’s side knows no country’s flag or anthem. God’s side is the side of justice and peace. The good news that we search for in the Bible is often tainted by our surroundings. I would like to think that it was a “God-thing” as the coach of Auburn said, but God has more important priorities. All people in the world

have full status with God. We need a new awareness that God's blessings are not zero sum. We do not need to say to God as the prodigal son told his father: "bless me and let me go" at the expense of our brothers and sisters of God.<sup>153</sup>

The garden on the grounds of our church campus is my hope for the world in which some can skip the lines while others cannot. Skipping the line is not ordained by God, but harvest is definitely in God's dream. Following Jesus does not give us skip the line passes in the Magic Kingdom or the Kin-dom of God. Following Jesus challenges us and pushes us to offer up the harvest of God that we steward to others.

God, in the midst of the world of people waiting for a stamp to enter into new lands, calls us to leave Egypt. We are enslaved to something that is not God. It is of our own creation and could lead to our mutually assured destruction. The cross offers us a reality check. Is it a symbol that we adorn our necks and our buildings symbolizing privilege, domination, and oppression or is it a symbol to stand up to those evil social systems as Jesus did.

We must leave Egypt and go to a land flowing with milk and honey. I may not be around to see it, but it must be our effort. The forces of oppression are chasing us and silencing us, but God is guiding us in this journey. For God so loved the world, that God gave us Jesus Christ *to save us from ourselves*.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Luke 15:11-32 NRSV

<sup>154</sup> John 3:16 NRSV, italics added

APPENDIX: RESPONSE FROM FAMOUS PROSPERITY GOSPEL  
TELEVANGELIST'S PRAYER DEPARTMENT (CREFLO DOLLAR)

I reached out for thoughts from people who differ from my own in terms of blessing. I reached out to numerous famous prosperity gospel televangelists. I only got a response from Creflo Dollar's Prayer Department. It is clear that parts of the email are copied and pasted from his study notes that can be found on his website.<sup>155</sup> In the email received on November 5, 2013, Dollar's representatives sought to answer my question. I informed him of my struggle and wrote about the story of my trip to Nicaragua. I mentioned that I was currently working on my D.Min. Project at Claremont School of Theology. I asked how one could tell the difference between privilege, blessing, and luck. I am grateful for the response and I hope to be respectful of his beliefs as I seek them compare it to mine.

To begin, the response starts with "Satan doesn't play fair! John 10:10 states that the thief cometh not but to kill, to steal and to destroy! So, he seizes every opportunity to try to wreak havoc in our lives." As aforementioned, I do not think that we need a devil. We are already doing a pretty dirty job with the constructed social systems. As you may have noticed, I do not even mention the devil in my writings. Some may find the devil in the social systems and those who directly or indirectly support them. In the end, I find it more fruitful to look at myself in the mirror and ask "have I been a devil?"

The email implorers me to "operate in God's system and not the luck system (play the lottery)." I think that I understand what the email is conveying about not putting your

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<sup>155</sup> Creflo Dollar, "Creflo Dollar Ministries - Study Notes," accessed November 6, 2013, <http://www.creflodollarministries.org/BibleStudy/StudyNotes.aspx>.

trust in a scratch off. However, I struggle with the idea that God has a “system” that can work for my prosperity. I would open to the discussion of whether God causes or allows things to happen to us.

The email states that “God takes pleasure in your prosperity because He is magnified in it (Psalm 35:27).” I appreciate that Creflo Dollar states that “society has reduced prosperity to money, but God is interested in total life prosperity, which includes, but is not limited to, money.” I would have a hard time saying that to the individuals living in the dump in Managua, Nicaragua. Honestly, I struggle equating God acting to increase someone’s money. Of course, money is a necessity in our time, but the thought that God acts to make me have money as millions live on less than a dollar a day makes me think that this understanding of God is geared for those in the position of privilege. If you add the fact that those with privilege have easier access to publish and share their ideas, we are going to be in trouble. We are in trouble!

The email tries to summarize the abovementioned comments by saying “As a Christian, you have already been blessed by God, however you must have a pure heart in order to withdraw the blessing.” I struggle the any notion that sums of God with “if you do \_\_\_\_, God will \_\_\_\_.” It turns God into a magic eight ball or a math equation. I used to believe God was like a math equation. In high school, a friend of mine got hurt playing football with us. A friend of mine said, “We need to pray over him. If we believe enough, God will heal him.” My friend did not miraculously get better. I felt guilty as it was my fault because I did not belief enough. This type of theology is dangerous of the self-esteem and bodily health of all of us.

The email informs me that as a “believer” that “blessing has already been

deposited in you.” I assume that a “believer” is someone who believes in Jesus. I wonder why all Christians are not prosperous. I also wonder why some non-Christians are prosperous. The email “comforts” me to say that I am not “cursed, or empower to fail, anymore.” I fear the notion of being cursed. I can understand people thinking that way 3,000 years ago, but I do not believe God removing a curse upon someone because they believe in Jesus. I suppose that some of the fans of the Boston Red Sox would think that they were cursed since they traded away Babe Ruth. They failed to win the championship since they traded away Babe Ruth in 1918. Thus, for 86 years, the Red Sox were cursed. How did they remove the curse in 2004? Did they all become believers of Jesus? If so, they should have announced it at the beginning of the season so that all would know that they would win. It could have saved a lot of time. In the end, it is scary when we do theology in reverse such as those folks who claim to be blessed by believing in Jesus after they win something that God (hopefully) cares nothing about in a world full of pain and suffering. This part of the email closes with scripture references noting that God wants to deliver me, but I have do something such as in Job 22:29,30; 2 Kings 5:20-27; and 2 Kings 4:29. I struggle with the notion that God waits for us to do something that helps God’s public relations before God is persuaded to help us. This is a very shallow and dependent upon the actions of others understanding of God.

The email closes with a final statement and some attachments entitled “The Source of the Blessing” and “Abiding in the Blessing.” The final statement that, I suppose, is made to make me feel happy, but also fearful is that “When you live daily with the awareness that Jesus could come back at any moment, you will be careful to keep sin and impurity out of your heart and life.” I am supposed to keep sin and impurity

out of my heart and life in order for God to bless me plus be fearful that Jesus may return at any time to do something that is contrary to the Jesus I read about in the Bible. My understanding of the Jesus who I read about in the Bible is that he is always raising our consciousness about our neighbor and God while inviting us to extend blessings throughout the world.

The attachment entitled “The Source of the Blessing” was written by Taffi Dollar, Creflo’s wife. The summary tells me that God is the source of blessing which prospers every area of our life. We activate the blessing by obeying God. She states that the definition of blessing is to cause to succeed or prosper. If I am understanding this correctly, Donald Trump is blessed. I am struggling here! She continues to note that when we obey God, God causes the blessings to come upon us. Again, it seems that we have to somehow activate this power by doing something for God. I wonder if God is this dependent upon us to do something for us to receive blessings from God. God does not have a limited number of blessings. If Jesus is willing to share blessings with a thief and a prostitute then he seems to not be keeping track of how many he has to pass out.<sup>156</sup> The attachment goes further to say that God pays attention to whom we associate with in life. I wonder if God wants to bless a believer in the dump in Managua, Nicaragua, but is unable because the associates of said believer.

The second attachment, “Abiding in the Blessing,” is written by Creflo Dollar. The summary says that God wants to bless us all the time, but God cannot do it if we separate ourselves from God. Apparently, God has short hands and cannot reach very far to give out blessings. Creflo Dollar goes on to say that the blessing means “to be empowered to have success in every area of life.” How can anyone living in a dump in

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<sup>156</sup> Luke 19:2, 5-10 and John 8:3-11 NRSV



Managua, Nicaragua have success in every area of life? It is almost as if they are doomed to feel guilty and have low self-esteem. It was difficult for the Boston Red Sox to win the World Series because they share the same division with the New York Yankees who spend more than anyone else in baseball on personnel and facilities. Plus, the Red Sox have to play the Yankees often. I appreciate that Creflo Dollar mentions that it is important to God for us to be in right relationship with our neighbors before we worship God. However, Creflo Dollar goes a step further to say that people can fail to be blessed because they have not forgiven someone. Again, this is a math equation in relation to receiving God's blessing. I struggle with this notion.

In the end, I think that I struggle the most with Creflo and Taffi Dollar because they fail to look outside of the Bible when try to understand God. I think that we have to use the theological quadrilateral - scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. To begin, my reasoning tells me that there are a myriad of reasons why someone living in the Managua dump cannot be successful in every area of her or his life. God is much bigger than any one book can contain. I rejoice that God is still active and speaking to all of God's children. We need to keep listen as we continually try to escape Egypt and its grasp on our lives.

## POSTSCRIPT: OK, SO NOW WHAT?

I went back to Alabama a couple of years ago after hundreds of tornadoes destroyed homes, power lines, and many lives in one night. Someone said to me that “God must be out to get someone with all of these tornadoes.” I replied, “If you believe that God acts in such a way, would not God be more economical than killing hundreds of people across the entire southeast United States to kill one person?” Now, more than ever as the world is shrinking due to various factors including the internet, is the time for spiritual formation.

As I sat in the back of my parent’s SUV going through some of the areas hit by tornadoes, I noticed that there was no method to the madness. One house would be completely gone while others were only missing a roof. On the other side, there would be a house that looked as if it was just built. I said to myself, “now is not the time for a destructive theology.” *In the midst of tornadoes and theologies that cause tornadoes, we need to be mindful of the need to spiritual formation that begins in the awareness of the other.*

As I reflect back on my journey, I am worrisome and hopeful as any progressive Christian would be in our time. Similar to Sisyphus, I am scared of the uphill battle that we face. I can see how one person, Constantine, shaped the trajectory of Christianity and its relation to power. I can see the City of Man and the City of God in competing narratives. I think of another person who invited us to a new way of life. In a world of crucifying oppression, Jesus gives me hope. He raised my consciousness of privilege, oppression, and domination. I aim to continue his words and actions while hoping to

participate in the resurrection of the world as it is enslaved to privilege.

Once I noticed the disparity of the use of term “blessing,” I could not let it go. God is offering us the opportunity to respond to this situation. We can have the faith of a child, but we do not have to continue to think as one. At times, God’s aim for us can consist of choosing between multiple goods. We are invited to respond to the use of term “blessing” in our world.

The way that we use the term confers the way that we understand God acting in the world. God offers us guidance by using our adult brains, weighing the options, considering all the possible influencing factors, and finding partners along the journey - those who are different than ourselves who could enrich our thoughts.<sup>157</sup>

I have concluded that God works similarly in the world. God offers guiding lights, encouraging voices, and soft nudges. God works with us for the best future for us. Said alternatively, God’s guidance is not dominating and controlling each of our moves and thoughts. Instead, God is working in and through our lives.

Some individuals look at the way that they have been privileged in life and, knowingly or not, have identified such as God’s blessings for them. Claiming one’s privilege as a blessing violates God’s nature. It is sinful and a threat to the existence of God’s entire creation. It causes suffering of the world which, then, causes God to suffer since God is relational.<sup>158</sup> God created the world so that it could be interdependent. This is a gift for us to remember. Yes, it is a direct threat to the cycle of privilege and social systems in the world.

It is easy to call one’s privilege a blessing; it is numbing and profitable. We do

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<sup>157</sup> Majorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 59-60.

<sup>158</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 63.

not have to feel as if our action or inactions affect others. We can live in our gated community minds without having to consider those who have to climb the fence as we pull the alarm to call the police. However, if we are going to progress as Christians, we must shift our way of thinking from a survival mode. Violence usually stems from self-interest. We picked up this trait on the evolutionary journey, it helped us survive over time. However, it does not have to dominate our theological construction. Sadly, too often, we construct theology to serve our self-interest in order for us to feel that we are not connected with others. We may come with our preconceived notions about a particular race, class, or other human created stratification, but Jesus invites us to have God-consciousness. In this mode, one's concerns and actions broaden to all of God's creation.<sup>159</sup>

Random luck may happen from time to time. Privilege has been constructed so well that it can be invisible to us. Blessings come from God to help us be aware that there are other people on this earth who are also made in God's image.

May God's dream become a reality. May we, the more privileged and the less privileged, bring this dream to fruition on earth with God's help.

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<sup>159</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 88.

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